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IRANIAN POLICY TOWARDS THE SYRIAN WAR

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Iranian Policy towards the Syrian War

Suriye Savaşına Karşı İran Politikası

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ACRONYMS

AAH- The Asaib Ahl al-Haq
CSIS- The Center for Strategic and International Studies.
EU- The European Union
FSA-The Free Syrian Army
GCC – The Gulf Cooperation Council
GFTO- The General Foreign Trade Organization (Syria)
GID- Th General Intelligence Directorate (Syria)
HAMA- The Movement of Islamic Resistance (Harakah al-Muqawamah al Islamiyyah)
ILNA- Iranian Labor News Agency (or in Persian Khabar Guzari Kari Iran)
IRGC- The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
IRGC - AF - The IRGC Air Forces
IRGC - GF - The IRGC Ground Forces
IRGC - N - The IRGC Naval Forces
IRI- The Islamic Republic of Iran
ISIS- Islamic State of Iraq and Sham
KH- Kata‘ib Hezbollah
LH- The Lebanese Hezbollah
NATO- The North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDF- The National Defense Force (Syria)
PMF- The Popular Mobilization Forces (Iraq)
PYD- Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (The Kurdish Democratic Union Party)
SNC- The Syrian National Council
TAA-Train-Advice-Assist
UN- The United Nations
US- The United States

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ABSTRACT

The popular uprisings in Syria, which marked the beginning of the current crisis in March 2011, caused instability throughout the region. In addition to the regional and non-regional powers involved to varying degrees, the theater of conflict in Syria has seen Iran taking to the stage with an increasingly active role. Iran was initially vocal in support of the spread of popular Arab uprisings across the Arab world and was swift in hailing them as “Islamic Awakenings,” but as Syria’s civil war threatened a forty-year-old Syrian-Iranian Alliance. This thesis is, therefore, an attempt to shed light on the way in which Iranian policy towards the Syrian War has been fueled by a pragmatic position, from the year 2011 to the year 2017. The thesis also analyzes the impact that the civil war in Syria has had on Iranian politics by taking a look into the matter from both the hardliner’s perspective and that of the liberal reformists. What will be demonstrated, the recent events indicate that the empowerment of the Hardliners and IRGC all this shows that the Syrian crisis became a watershed movement and it had a great impact on the internal political power configuration of Iran. It completely changed the tide of power against the reformist’s camp although they had two consecutive electoral victories.

ÖZET

Suriye'deki halk ayaklanmaları Mart 2011'de, mevcut krizin başlangıcını belirledi ve bölge genelinde istikrarsızlığa neden oldu. Çeşitli derecelerde yer alan bölgesel ve bölgesel olmayan güçlere ek olarak, Suriye'deki çatışma tiyatrosu, İran'ın daha aktif bir rol üstlenerek sahneye çıktığını gördü. İran başlangıçta Arap ayaklanmalarının Arap dünyasına yayılmasını destekleme noktasında sesini çıkarmaktan çekinmedi ve onları “İslami Uyanışlar” olarak görmekte hızlıydı, ancak Suriye'nin iç savaşı kırk yıllık bir Suriye-İran İttifakını tehlikeye düşürdü. Bu tez, bu nedenle, 2011'den 2017 yılına kadar İran'ın Suriye Savaşı'na yönelik politikasının pragmatik bir tutumla nasıl tetiklendiğine ışık tutmaya çalışmaktadır. Bu tez aynı zamanda Suriye'deki iç savaşın, konuyu hem sertlik yanlılarının perspektifinden hem de liberal reformistlerin bakış açısıyla inceleyerek, İran politikaları üzerindeki etkisini analiz etmektedir. Bu Makalede gösterilecek olan, son olayların, sertlik yanlıları ve İran Devrim Muhafızları Ordusu'nun güçlendirilmesinin, tüm bunların Suriye krizinin bir dönüm noktası hareketi olduğunu ve İran'ın iç politik güç yapılandırması üzerinde büyük bir etkisi olduğunu belirtmesidir. Bu, iki ardışık seçim zaferine rağmen, reformist kampına karşı güç istikametini tamamen değiştirmiştir.

INTRODUCTION

Iran has stubbornly held on to the position of being side by side in support of the Bashar al-Assad government, during the whole of the Syrian crisis. The ability of Iran's alliance with next door Syria to survive is significant, as the partnership is founded much more on a tactical basis than any shared religious or cultural one.

When it seemed that the uprisings that later became known as the Arab Spring were only in opposition to Western-backed regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen, Syria announced them as glorious revolutions to throw off the chains of the oppressors. Iran did not sing the same tune about the uprisings in Syria, claiming the opposition to the Assad regime were "terrorists" supported by a bunch of Gulf Arab states, Israel and the United States. The fact is that if Iran had not provided both military and monetary aid, the regime in Damascus would be long gone.

The violent events of 2011 in Syria rippled in Tehran and triggered a new chapter of the saga in the history of Iranian - Syrian relationships, testing to the limit a bond of over four decades. The desire of the leadership in Damascus and Tehran to collaborate on foreign policy is driven by a shared need to preserve their power in the region. Maintaining territorial integrity and national security is, therefore, paramount. There has been a shared perception of threat from the two countries and also a shared perception of benefits in the case of both nations' interests in Lebanon and Iraq and also in championing the Palestine resistance. It is by means of mutual economic and political assistance that the Iranian – Syrian marriage of convenience thieves. The joint tactic of gathering and supporting a network of surrogate militias, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, has made this alliance a formidable thorn in the side of their opponents. With minor differences in ideological matter and religious standpoints and common goals, they have been able to successfully impose their position on the regional chessboard. Therefore, in this chapter can be found an in-depth exploration of all the relevant historical phases that shaped the alliance between Syria and Iran by providing a theoretical

framework. To properly analyze the historical events that forged the Iran-Syria alliance, the different periods will be considered in the following way.

The second chapter is a look into Iran's response to the Arab revolutions from its view that these narratives can be encompassed within a glorious Iranian vision, based on Iran's influence in the Islamic world and its future. Then Iran's initial enthusiasm about the Arab revolutions of Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen faded out. In Libya, Iran's optimism was deflated after the NATO military intervention. Iran continued to declare Bahrain's as a "genuine revolution backed by divine power" But as we see when it came to Syria, Iran's position took a stark U-turn and it proceeded to denounce the Syrian revolution claiming that it was a Zionist plot of the west. This chapter shows that Iran's rhetoric on the Syrian revolution has been brief, abstracted, and almost blasé toward the victims of the conflict.

In this chapter, I also put forward my argument about how the initial problem referred to as the Syrian peaceful protests, evolved way beyond the problem of any one state and escalated into a regional proxy war and then became the complex scene of proxy wars of several powerful nations. In this context, the dynamics of the crisis in Syria were then diversified. The civil war dynamics already inside Syria included sectarian clashes and were to play a part in the geopolitical rivalry between the regional and global powers that participated in the civil war, manipulating and exploiting the situation as proxies. To highlight this, the ultimate aim of the chapter in the first stage is to show all the elements and surrounding context that prompted the original peaceful protests in Syria and in the second stage the chapter will provide an account of the internal, regional and international dimensions of the crisis.

The third chapter examines the approach adopted by Iran toward the Syrian civil war between 2011 and 2017, by addressing the question: *How has Iranian policy gradually changed in accordance with the new developments in Syria?* The research is aimed at the initial drivers of Iran's policy on the Syria conflict, by contextualizing its involvement through four separate motivations. In this manner, the chapter strives to give an explanation of Iran's activity in Syria,

through a pragmatic position by dealing with how the Iranian regime has developed a narrative of official foreign policy on Syria throughout the different phases of the war in Syria.

Meanwhile, this chapter also gives a thorough explanation to Iran's multilayered strategy will be analyzed in this chapter, which includes an extensive, expensive, and coordinated effort. The chapter shows how the assistance and aid to Syria gradually increased and took different forms over the various stages of the Syrian crisis from 2011, 2012, and later in September 2015.

In the last chapter, I have tried to show how both rivaling sides of the hardliners and the reformers approach the policy in Syria and also details the process of how the developments in Syria affected politics in Iran in a manner which gave the hardliners the edge. In the chapter also, what will be gone into is the relevant context and progression of Tehran's policy on Syria and its ever-worsening war, firstly by providing some information about the relationship between previous president Ahmadinejad and the Assad regime and then on to the current President, Hassan Rouhani and how he has managed the Syrian crisis. It will be explained that despite reformists coming out on top in two consecutive elections, their efforts in relation to foreign policy on Syria were quashed by the hardliners.

The purpose of this thesis is to give an account of Iranian foreign policy towards the Syrian civil war between 2011- 2017 and reveal its impact on the IR political power configuration, in order to thoroughly clarify the matter at hand, the thesis will examine the major hypothesis put forward as in the following way.

- I. Expansion of Iran-Syria relations caused by common Geopolitical and Geostrategic interests in the region.
- II. The Deposition of Shah's government by Ayatollah Rohullah Ali Khomeini in 1979, has been one of the factors contributing to the expansion of political relations between Iran and Syria
- III. Anti-Western-Israeli rhetoric and alignment of strategic goals have consolidated the axis of Iranian-Syrian relations.

- IV. The Syrian crisis caused a significant impact on the Iranian politics. The crisis changed the power configuration in Iran.
- V. With the ongoing crisis, the hardliners improved their stance and consolidated their position within the state.
- VI. Reformists camp, even though winning two consecutive elections, failed to change the hardliners Syria's policy.

With regard to the research methodology and material used, this thesis is based on qualitative research techniques, and it relies primarily on secondary sources (books, Journals, Article), along with documents and Iranian officials and government statements. As regards the sources, one of the strengths of this thesis is that the original sources in Persian have been extensively used. The study has also some potentials limitations that need to be shed light on. First of all, during my research I had a lot of difficulties in finding authentic Persian sources. Although I have tried to avoid using biased Persian sources in my thesis. As matter of fact, Iran is a country where no one would dare to question regime policies, and where most of the sources published online are either biased or very limited. therefore, I encountered a great deal of difficulties throughout my research finding authentic sources. But however, for the sake of my research originality, I contacted Iranian academicians in and outside of Iran both from the reformists camp and that of the hardliners who were really helpful and meanwhile I also looked at to the matter from both the hardliners and reformists perspectives by compare and contrasting both of their views over Iranian policy towards Syria.

Chapter I

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

1. Conceptual Framework for The Alliance Formation

When discussing an alliance between two nations, it is commonly understood to mean “an alliance is a formal or informal arrangement for security cooperation between two or more sovereign states”¹ And one whereby all parties envisage benefits for their own interests in the realms of political, diplomatic and economic influence. In the field of international relations, alliances between various influential nations, how and why they are set up and what the particular strategies and benefits are, is one of the key elements to be discussed and understood. It may be no surprise that there is a large body of literature on alliances in the world of academia. The origin of alliances is one of the top debated subjects for those studying international relations. In relation to why states may establish an alliance, it comes down to the number one concern for any nation-state which is its national security and as studies show it is to seek to ensure protection from a perceived outside threat that alliances are mainly formed. If the threat is from within the country, then it is understood that it is normally smaller and less powerful developing states making moves to strengthen their grip on a local level, as a pose to larger powerful world players, who make alliances to conserve their power. These two are the main approaches in the vast majority of studies looking into the cause of political alliances. Other than this, there are a certain number of other scholars who also focus on cultural similarities as a key factor to be considered in the forming of alliances.²

The assumption that nations seek alliances with other nations for the interest of their national security is prevalent in the literature dominated by realist and neorealist approaches. International relations being the arena of battling states, all

¹ Walt, S.M., 1990. *The origins of alliance*. Cornell University Press. pp.12

² Walt, S.M., 1985. Alliance formation and the balance of world power. *International security*, 9(4), pp.3-43

seeking to maximize their own power and benefit, is the view of classical realism and tends also to bring human nature to the focus. The assumption of this framework is that of a more open playing field, a rationally unified body of actors and everyone fighting to come out on top, with states acting out their policies on the global stage and calculating their moves and rationally weighing up the cost. Whereas neorealism posits a more uneven playing field. According to this model, states are restricted by the structure of the anarchic international system in which lesser powerful nations make alliances with other less powerful ones to try to offset the balance of power because power is inherently distributed unequally.³

Along these lines, Waltz. (2010), declares that nation-states make alliances because of imbalance and hegemony. He believes that the international system is anarchic, and so, countries struggle to get the largest slice of power they can. According to him, the alliances of weaker states in response to the threat of larger states are simply the inevitable counterbalance caused by the initial imbalance of power in the world. He insists on this balancing behavior of weaker states in his BOP theory. So as far as Waltz is concerned the key to understanding the origin of alliances is to look at the balancing behavior of weak countries, in response to strong ones. Indeed, it can be seen from history that every time a nation has dominant, there has been a counter force of allegiances, such as in the case of the whole of Europe uniting against the Nazis of Germany from 1933-1945.⁴

In neorealist theory, we find that states are seen as entirely rational actors simply asserting a push to maximize their own interest and make more defensive kind of alliances based on that and not in order to join the side of the dominant power of the day or ‘bandwagoning’. (Mearsheimer, 2009, Shadunts(2016) Liska (1962), Morgenthau (1960), Waltz (1979) are all related to the school of the BOP.

³ Keohane, R.O., 1986. *Neorealism and its Critics*. Columbia University Press for further information, Waltz book could be checked. Waltz, K.N., 2010. *Theory of international politics*. Waveland Press. 204-209

⁴ Waltz, K.N., 2010. *Theory of international politics*, Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press. Pp:103-132

Most traditional literature falls within the BOP (balance of power) theory.^{5,6}

Even though the BOP theory has become such a dominant approach, some questions exist about the soundness of this theory. The idea of smaller developing nations seeking alliances to strengthen them against big threatening nations has actually been challenged a lot by various scholars. Amongst those who contest this theory are scholars who hold to another view named, utility theory. In utility theory, a state simply forms alliances based on utility, so it maybe to jump on the bandwagon or it may be to balance the power, it just depends on what it determines is more useful to it. David Newman (1982) as a supporter of this view, mentions that the more dominant and influential states are more likely to establish alliances than the smaller ones and therefore does not accept the neorealist BOP theory that the weaker states form alliances as a counter against the stronger ones (Walt, S.M., 1990).⁷

Following the same line of thought is Brian Healey and Arthur Stein who oppose the BOP thesis of the neorealist and suggest that bandwagoning is the prevalent impulse of states who seek to find partners to bolster their position, rather than making an alliance of the weak to stand up to the tyrant. Brian Healey and Arthur Stein point out that the alliance from 1870-1881 was entirely the result of bandwagoning and not as a result of BOP or balancing.⁸

In the contrasting perspective, we have Stephen M. Walt, who had some adjustments of the neorealist view put the emphasis on threat rather than power in explaining the motives for international alliances. He followed the neorealist theory in regard to the anarchic nature of the international system and balance of power to a large degree, but he asserted that nation-states do not really make alliances against the strongest states but the most threatening. For him, “An alliance is a formal or informal commitment for security cooperation between two or more states,

⁵ Mearsheimer, J.J., 2009. Reckless States and Realism. *International Relations*, 23(2), pp.241

⁶ Shadunts, Alen, The Rational Actor Assumption in Structural Realism. *E-International Relations*. Available at: <http://www.e-ir.info/2016/10/28/the-rational-actor-assumption-in-structural-realism/>

⁷ Walt, S.M., 1990. *The Origins of Alliance*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press. Pp:9

⁸ Ibid page 8

intended to augment each member's power, security, and influence." The key factor for him is the "commitment for mutual support against some external actors." So, he is saying that states choose allies not to balance the power but to balance the threat. Therefore Stephen M. Walt redefines the theory of the neorealist from the balance of power to "balance of threat." In this way, a nation is not merely considered a threat because of its size and power but because of its geographical proximity, intentions it is believed to have, perhaps a conflicting agenda is perceived threatening. In Walt's theory, alliances may also be made on the basis of how states choose sides in a conflict, either by balancing or bandwagoning. Walt defines balancing as "allying with others against a prevailing threat," and bandwagoning as the "alignment with the source of danger."⁹

Walt puts forward that both defensive and offensive reasons can drive bandwagoning. Defensively to appease the dominant power and offensively to profit, directly or indirectly, from the victory of the dominant power. It can also be a combination of both reasons. Walt strongly suggests that balancing is, empirically, the main response we can observe in response to external threats and bandwagoning is virtually always carried out by weak and isolated developing nations. Bandwagoning is risky as it suggests trusting the dominant power and also serves as an increase in their resources and as is often the case, today's friend can be tomorrow's enemy. Joining the weaker side entails obstructing the emergence of the prevailing hegemony that can be a threat to everyone.

Ideology can form another factor in an alliance between nations. "Ideological solidarity" Hans Morgenthau's phrase, denotes those alliances that result from states sharing the same political, ideological and cultural features. This theory is that of similarity being the key motive, so the more similar the two nations are, the more chance that they will seek an alliance.¹⁰ It follows that you trust whoever thinks like you and looks like you, but however, this is considered by most as not the main

⁹ Ibid page 12-18

¹⁰ Walt, S.M., 1985. Alliance formation and the balance of world power. *International security*, 9(4), pp.18-20

reason for states to make alliances with one another. In the complex shifting world of international relations, the role of ideology is not actually seen as the major factor in alliances as far as the numerous studies suggest that ideology may play an important role but to some limited extent. Ideology such as in the case of Soviet-Poland, communism as an ideology did not explain Soviet-Polish relations, nor the history of the Sino-Soviet relations.¹¹

A shared ideology may sometimes help an alliance but can often ideologies do more harm than good and simply generate more conflict than cooperation among those involved. In many cases an ideology calls adherent to follow a centralized hierarchy or a single supreme leadership, who alone claims the ultimate right to articulate what their ideology is and how it must be followed, then in such cases, conflict is virtually inevitable.

Firstly, an ideology is a source of legitimacy for each member of an alliance, and they assert a jointly held belief in their ideology being generally valid. However, when the ideology then requires a single leader, then all states or in the alliances will face being subservient to the one that assumes the leadership position.

Secondly, this situation creates endless argumentation amongst its members because the dominant one acquires dominance by asserting their interpretation of the ideology, then all the others will challenge that interpretation in a bid to gain supremacy over the others, and this can get serious as they become rivals, declaring the others as heretics.¹²

Stephen Walt in his book “The origins of Alliances” also argues that (1985), usually once nation states gain a level of strength and security, they follow their ideological preferences but when in danger they tend to accept whatever ally they can get if it will mean a way out of that current danger. As was seen in the 1920s, when Germany's weakness allowed for Britain, along with the United States and her European allies to treat the Soviet Union with disdain, this was based largely on ideology and echoed back by the Soviets. Once the Nazis began to rise in

¹¹ Ibid: Walt, S.M., 1985. Alliance formation and the balance of world power

¹² Ibid see page 20-22

strength and become a real threat, the ideological preferences lost all their impact.¹³ In other words, security concerns take priority over ideologies and ideologically based alliances are unlikely to survive when more directly dangerous events take place.

This is why Walt indicates that ideology actually has a limited role in establishing alliances and its role is often exaggerated to various degrees based on the nature of the particular ideology, and that ideological parallels may end up in disputation. While it cannot be ignored, it should not, however, be seen as the main reason behind an alliance of two or more states. Common ideologies have even shown to be problematic and cause significant hurdles for a durable alliance, as each nation involved tends to see itself as the prime authority in regards to its own understanding and requires the others to surrender their rights and sovereignty in order to produce a united bloc of States, who can act harmoniously as one.

Therefore, threats to a nation's security from the outside appear to be the major factor when establishing alliances. As most of the theorist center, their arguments and hypothesis on the external threat for the formation of Alliance. While on the other hand other theorists such as, Steven R. David (1991), who according to his theory "Omni Balancing" argues that along with the external threats internal threats have to be also taken into consideration. According to Steven David, the balance of power theory certainly provides a lot of clarity, when it comes to accounting for Third World alignment, it does not quite manage to give a satisfactory explanation. With Third World alignment behavior, it is more relevant to be seen in terms of rational strategizing of Third World leaders, maneuvering according to who on the world stage, is expected to do what is necessary to sustain them in power. The core point behind the balance of power theory is pretty much undeniable: leaders of Third World nations, as well as leaders of other nations, seek to form alliances in order to combat the threats they face.

Overall according to the assumptions regarding the strength of an alliance

¹³ Walt, S.M., 1990. *Origins of Alliance*, Cornell University Press. Page: 21-22

and its capacity to withstand the test of the time believed to due to strategic and political considerations, with the sharing of enemies and threat-balancing being the main factors at work. It did originate as an answer to seriously threatening invasions by enemy powers. As Iran's certainly required the help of Syria's during the Iraqi invasion and Syria's need for Iranian assistance against Israel when they proceeded to the invasion of Lebanon, and this mutual assistance builds the bonds of a strong and lasting alliance. As realist theory puts it, the imbalance of power that exists in the international arena always invites counterbalancing alliances. The outcome is also in line with the realist view that relies on power balancing to push back the biggest states and therefore, promotes balance and stability. The alliance had a clear balancing effect on the Israeli-American coalition in Lebanon during the time of the 1982 Israeli invasion and the pro-Iraq alliance of the Iran-Iraq conflict; in both examples mentioned, the revisionist (Israeli, Iraqi) agenda was halted in virtually the exact way that balancing theory explains. We may say that the aims of Syria and especially of Iran are revisionist in nature and also represent defensive moves, because of their balancing states with at least equally revisionist outlooks, the Iran-Syria relationship has basically supported the regional's status quo. This alliance has always had a core feature of countering the power of Iraq and Israel and the penetration of the region by western hegemony.¹⁴

It should be also pointed out the geography has also played a part in shaping the Iran-Syria alliance and of course, their experiences. With that said, however, the influence of a shared ideological view of the world and its effect of the attitudes of the rulers of both countries should also not go unnoticed. There is a crossover in much of their secular political philosophy, putting them in harmony in relation to many of their political views. Iran has often attempted to utilize its own Islamic revolutionary ideology to transcend tribalism and promote some form Islamic unity across the region by trying to undo age-old Arab-Iranian tensions and to show their solidarity with the Arabs in their struggle against Israel. Syria has sought to solve

¹⁴ Ehteshami, A. & Hinnebusch, R.A., 1997. *Syria and Iran: middle powers in a penetrated regional system*, London: Routledge., Pp7-24

the political disharmony of the Arab world and by offering itself as a tool for regenerating Arab unity since Syria sees itself as the birthplace and natural home of Arabism. In relation to their alliance, the Middle East has been viewed by Hafez Assad, Rohullah Khomeini, and their subsequent successors as a highly strategic arena, crucial for the progress of Arab Islamic interests and the increase of autonomy from foreign powers. So, therefore, both parties have over time proved that they prioritize a long-term agenda to advance their joint goals.¹⁵

Balancing and bandwagoning approaches can be seen in action over the course of the Iran-Syria alliance. In the more recent phase of the alliance between the two Middle Eastern neighbors, which saw the Syrian uprisings, we can observe the Omni balancing theory as being relevant. The Omni balancing theory asserts that leaders have to balance both abasing internal and external threats. What could be observed from the violent uprisings in Syria fits with the Omni balancing version of events. Assad was attempting to hold on to power in the country, while surrounded by huge international pressure. Then came Syria's alliance with Iran as an essential pillar of strength and support, without which Assad could not survive. The Assad regime's survival had then become almost entirely in the hands of Tehran. So, this is a clear example of a state using an alliance to balance against threats on both a domestic and international level.¹⁶

The Middle East is a political hotbed of shifting alliances, and the Iran-Syria combination is one most influential and enduring. Events following Iran's so-called Islamic revolution in 1979, the alliance has faced many threats throughout the last four decades, including the Iran-Iraq War and several popular uprisings. Today the alliance is continuing within the context of Syria's harsh and drawn-out civil war; it is because both parties find each other on the same page as they see themselves as in the front line in the plight to push back against the U.S. and Israel and their hegemonic ambitions in the region. So, having shared goals is important when

¹⁵ Goodarzi, J.M., 2009 version. *Syria and Iran: diplomatic alliance and power politics in the Middle East*, London: Tauris Academic Studies. Pp. 294 check the version published in 2009.

¹⁶ Coskun, G., 2016. *Syria-Iranian Relations during Bashar Al- Assad Period: A Test Case for Alliance Theories*.

attempting to comprehend what is motivation Iran in its involvement in the Syrian Civil War. In Iran's approach on Syria, there is a clearly discernible emphasis on a defensive strategy in a bid to maintain and consolidate power.

All in all, even though Syria's alliance with Iran may seem unusual to some onlookers, the key objective they have in common is neutralizing common enemies and threats, so in that sense, the Iranian-Syrian alliance must be understood as more of a defensive response to major upheavals taking place in the region. This thesis will thus analyze the historical stages behind the Iranian - Syrian alliance in the following way.

1.2. Historical Background to the Syrian- Iranian Alliance

An enormously robust alliance has always been seen in the two Middle Eastern neighbors of Iran and Syria for over thirty years. Their policy has caused considerable ripples of opposition within the Middle East and the outside world. Both Syria and Iran have a sizeable skepticism of foreign meddling into their affairs, and they have side by side charted their way through the shifting balance of powers in their region in order to protect their economies. Iran and Syria tend to come to the aid of one another in difficult times, and it is clear they have a lot to bring them together, not just sharing the same enemies but also sharing much of the same religious and political viewpoints. This partnership has been referred to as a "marriage of convenience," and a "strategic alliance," and it is always stood firm through all the turbulence in a volatile region. The Syrian-Iranian alliance has not had many in-depth studies conducted, seeking to explain and shed light on it in terms of alliance theory, but there are some studies offering a theoretical background.

Odd couple: Baathist Syria and Khomeini's Iran (2015) was a paper written by Hirschfield and labeled the alliance as the odd couple because, as he sees it, in the face of their conflicting political views, they have still managed to hold together. Syria is an Arab country with a dominantly secular ruling ideology and Iran, as a Persian country has its own distinct culture and also with its strong Shiite identity

firmly rooted in its governing ideology. This alliance is inevitably at times, favors Iran more than Syrian and at other times vice versa. Hirschfeld notes in his paper that the reason for the alliance may be understood as the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and Iraqi occupation.¹⁷ Iran and to a lesser degree, Egypt's betrayal following the Yom Kippur War. Hartfield did state that the moment Saddam is toppled in Iraq, the Syrian-Iranian alliance would fall apart, somewhat underestimating the strength of their relationship.

Jubin Goodarzi (2009), also notes that due to the anarchy state of the Middle East, there have always been conflicting blocs in the region. Therefore, he calls the Syrian Iranian alliance as defensive in nature and assume that it was intended at balancing the Iraqi, Israeli threat, and obstructing the US gradual advance in the Middle East. Goodarzi, in his article, also proposes a number of reasons that have contributed to the longevity and nature of the Syrian Iranian alliance. Although he in his paper has thoroughly explained the alliance between the two nations, but there are still major informations lacking in his work.¹⁸

The vast majority of studies carried out on this subject are considerably narrow in scope, as they focus purely on the timeline of events that charted the history of the alliance and somewhat mentioned some of its underlying reasons and nature. None of the studies delve into a thorough examination of the alliance within the context of the alliance theory of international relations. Therefore, according to the principles of alliance theory, the Iran-Syria relationship will be analyzed in depth, following its chronological order in this thesis. The political alliance of Syria and Iran was founded immediately after the inception of the Islamic Republic of Iran following the famous Iranian revolution of 1979. Since then this alliance has survived through the Iran-Iraq War then came popular uprisings and today the horrific Syrian civil war in 2011. Through all these turbulent events and challenges the relationship has survived, and both nations remain united in resistance to the

¹⁷ Hirschfeld, Y., Ma'oz, M. and Yaniv, A., 1986. Syria under Assad: Domestic Constraints and Regional Risks.

¹⁸ Goodarzi, J.M., 2013. Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment. *Middle Eastern Studies/Ortadogu Etütleri*, 4(2). Page 33-52

US and Israel, and these uniting factors are crucial to grasp the severity of what at present, is at stake for Iran in the Syrian crisis. The Iranian agenda in Syria comes out of sharing many of the same views on local issues such as the Palestinian situation and the ongoing presence in neighboring Lebanon. Looking to hold their position of influence in the Middle East, Iran also can be seen to have a defensive mindset as the Syrian conflict has become so enmeshed in a myriad of agendas from both state and non-state actors. Prior to revealing the complexities of all the various elements concerning Iran's involvement in Syria, it is time to pause to take a methodological note.

Firstly, it should be mentioned that the alliance between the two counties, as has been stated, has not been subjected to much academic inquiry, even though it is one of the longest standings in the region. In this paper, the history of the alliance will be focused on in order to shed light on the secret of the alliance's longevity. This chapter aims to address all the relevant historical events over the periods that have seen this alliance develop, giving an in-depth analysis and backdrop to the Syrian-Iranian cooperative relationship. Revealing a theoretical framework and showing the reasons why this particular alliance has managed to weather the storms; each period will be considered, respectively.

1.2.1. The Emergence of the Syrian-Iranian Alliance

Arab nations lost major territories to Israel, including Sinai, West Bank, and East Jerusalem. As a result of the six days war of 1967. In a bid to regain the occupied lands, the then Egyptian president, Muhammad Anwar el-Sadat appealed to the US for assistance in establishing some kind of peace negotiations with Israel. Sadat was rejected from both sides and had been hoping that the US would be willing to persuade Israeli to come to the table for talks to restore the status quo of the territories. Sadat warned the Americans that if the situation of these occupied territories remains, it would eventually escalate into another war. Unfortunately, not only was this warning was not listened to, but Sadat then became the target of accusations that he was unable out strike against Israel. Since diplomacy had failed,

Sadat began to seek alternative solutions, and he set a plan in motion with Syrian president Hafiz Al Assad. He managed to persuade him to join him in an attack against Israel. Egypt and Syria simultaneously launched a military assault against Israel on Yom Kippur, the holiest day in Judaism, October 6th, 1973, which also happens to be during the month of Ramadan in which Muslims fast. Syrian troops entered the Golan Heights, while those of the Egyptian military made it across the Suez Canal and established their positions in the East Bank. At first, the Israelis were caught by surprise and severely rattled as they were not prepared and in the midst of celebrating their holy day with most of them off duty. The attack initially seemed to humiliate Israel, but the conflict ended in disaster with neither side coming out on top. Egypt did not succeed in this war, but the Egyptian president did manage to earn some esteem throughout the Arab world, which gave him the chance to force Israeli to restore the occupied territory of the Sinai Peninsula.¹⁹

Following this conflict with Israel and Egypt's withdrawal from it in October 1973, Cairo restored good relations with Israel and signed a mutual peace accord and agreement including the Sinai agreement in 1975, which, left Syria exposed to military threats from Israel. The events unfolded to mean that Egypt was no longer against Israel and the Syrian offensive serenely weakened, leaving them in no way willing to carry the fight against Israel. During the end of March 1977, President Anwar Sadat went to Israel, and in September 1978 the Camp David accord was signed between Israel and Egypt, which further angered Syria leaving Syria with the need to look elsewhere for an alliance. Turning to Syria's ex-brethren from the Baathist party in Iraq, they set up a rejectionist alliance with Iraq to counter Israel, which was a daunting task. There was in some degree of success from this military alliance in holding the Israeli army within the proper borders on the frontlines.²⁰

¹⁹ Stephens , E., 2008. Caught on the Hop:The Yom Kippur War. , pp.44–50.

²⁰ Goodarzi, J.M., 2006. *Syria and Iran: diplomatic alliance and power politics in the Middle East*, London: Tauris Academic Studies. Pp. 16-18 check the version published in 2006.

But in a short time, a rift between the two states opened up when Iraq accused Damascus of plotting a coup attempt against the Baathist government in Baghdad in 1979. Syria denied this, but relations went sour with increasing distrust, leaving Damascus even more isolated after a series of setbacks and distrust from its Arab neighbors. Therefore, it came as no surprise that Syria focused on consolidating relations with Iran just at the time of its newly established Revolutionary Government.

1.2.2. Strengthening of the Syrian-Iranian Alliance-1979

One of the key events in the history of the modern Middle East was the 1979 Iranian Revolution. With the despised Pahlavi dynasty toppled, not only were their big transformations taking place inside Iran but also in the whole region, it was like a new era of political change. The new Iranian government under Ayatollah Khomeini's leadership drastically changed what the world could expect from Iranian foreign policy. Pompous, imperial Iran, which had always been kowtowing to the west in its foreign policy, had overnight, morphed into a new republic claiming a puritanical religious ideology, with vast ambitions to shape and influence the politics of the Middle East as a whole.²¹

The whole region was in shock at the revolutionary changes sweeping across Iran and particularly the Arab world. Many states who had previously enjoyed close relations with the imperial regime were now worried and unsure how things would go on, and several pro-Soviet governments welcomed the changes emphatically. On February 12, 1979, Assad sent a telegram congratulating Khomeini for his victory over the Shah. In his telegram, he praised the "Iranian people's victory," and said: "we proclaim our support for the new regime created by the revolution in Iran and the great principles of Islam inspire this regime. The creation of this regime is in the Iranian people's greatest interest, as well as that of the Arabs and Muslims." Fitting as it was, Syria was the first Arab nation to congratulate Iran for its revolution, though Libya, Algeria, South Yemen, and the

²¹ Ibid pp: 11-4

PLO also declared their strong support for the new situation unfolding in Tehran.²²

On the other hand, Iraq, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan were not so vocal in support of what had transpired in Iran. Iraq's foreign minister, after hearing about the Iranian revolution simply stated 'Iran's internal affairs concern the Iranian people only. However, in the winter of 1978/9, the Baathists of Iraq were becoming growingly troubled about the changes in Iran taking on fiercely religious rhetoric. As Baghdad was all too aware what a Shiite revival could mean for Iraq and how much it could be affected by such a situation. When previously Shah's close ally, King Hussein of Jordan had gone on record, stating that Khomeini was a heretic.

Hafez Assad's brother, Rifaat, immediately following the revolution, sent envoys to Iran in order to hold talks on their alliance and all the various areas in which they have a mutual concern, especially in relation to their common enemy of Iraq. The Iranian government then responded by a delegation to Syria and held talks on how to assist the opposition to Iraq primarily in the Shiite majority south. In March, Syria's minister of information, Ahmad Iskandar Ahmad, met Ayatollah Khomeini in the Iranian province of Qom and gave him a gift from Hafez Assad, which consisted of a very precious illuminated copy of the Quran and this was the first of visit of a senior official to the new revolutionary Iran.²³

Iran and Syria's bilateral relations fell into place as a tool of assistance for both nations right from the inception of the new revolutionized republic of Iran, and both nation's domestic and foreign policies bore striking similarities. The regimes in Tehran and Damascus seemed to share an almost identical outlook and interpretation of the events that were developing in the region. All this made for a fertile ground for their alliance. Iran saw relationships with Arab countries who had previously been allies with the previous government deteriorate, such as Morocco, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq. At the same time, those Arab governments and

²² Goodarzi, J.M., 2002. *The formative years of the Syrian Iranian alliance: Power politics in the Middle East, 1979-1989*(Doctoral dissertation, London School of Economics and Political Science (United Kingdom)). pp-18

²³ Goodarzi, J.M., 2009. *Syria and Iran: diplomatic alliance and power politics in the Middle East*, London: Tauris Academic Studies. Pp. 19-21

movements that had been opposed to the Shah started to be friendly with Iran. Movements, such as Libya's Muammar Qadhafi and Shiite groups in Iraq and Lebanon were now fostering close relations with the newly revolutionized Iran. It was to be expected then in early May when Ayatollah Khomeini ordered the cutting of diplomatic relations with Egypt "bearing in mind the treacherous treaty between Israel and the Egyptian Government's unreserved obedience to the USA and Zionism."²⁴

There were very few allies that Syria could place any trust in, early in 1979, with Egypt out of the picture, Syria had at first sought to strike up a partnership with Iraq. In the winter of 1978, they managed to make some steps towards an alliance, but by April 1979, the two factions in the Baath Party could not reconcile conflicting visions about what their alliance would entail. When negotiations got slower and slower and ended up frozen, the Syrian president started to consider other viable alliances, so he then focused on allying with Iran in order to sideline Iraq and boost his position among the Gulf nations and further strengthen his influence with the Lebanese Shiite community.

The collapse of attempts at a Syrian-Iraqi alliance came at the same as the outbreak of the new Islamic Republic of Iran. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 actually served to heighten existing tension and obstructed the path to reconciliation and Iraq and Syria could be consistently seen as espousing opposing views on key topics related to Iran, whether it was about the Shah, Khomeini, Shiite fundamentalism or Arab-Iranian relations, Damascus and Baghdad were at loggerheads. Syria gave a safe haven to the Shah's opponents during the '70s, when in Iraq, Khomeini was expelled at the Shah's request in October 1978. After the Iranian revolution, the Assad regime in Syria welcomed the revolution in Iran, but Iraq, on the contrary, were concerned about the revolution encouraging its Shiite populated southern region to make an uprising against the government.²⁵

Assad sent a second message of congratulations to Khomeini after a

²⁴ *ibid*

²⁵ *Ibid* see page 20-22

referendum on Iran's form of government took place. Also, he stated his belief that their alliance, on both an official and on a popular level, would continue to flourish and prosper. Their *rapprochement* in the spring and summer of 1979 came as Iran's relationship with Iraq and the Gulf Arab states saw an all-time low. At that time Iran was tiring up the Iraqi Shiite population to rebel against their government. Iraq was also busy trying many ways to encourage movements on the periphery of Iran that called for independence from the Iranian state, such as the Kurdish and Arabs, who were demanding autonomy. A large insurrection broke out in late spring from Iranian Kurds residing in the oil-rich province of Khuzestan (Arabestan), oil installations and government facilities were sabotaged by local resistance groups. The Baath Party in Iraq jumped on the chance to fuel the unrest as much as they could in order to try to pin down Iranian security forces, and therefore weaken the Iranian state to the benefit of their influence in the Gulf.²⁶

Overall, Syria considered revolutionary Iran a valuable ally in the struggle of the Arabs in their resistance against Israel, but Iraq saw the new Iran as a significant security threat to the eastern flank Arab world and the sheikhdoms of the Gulf States. In 1979/80, the Syria-Iran partnership got stronger, as Iraq was withdrawing further away and was starting to build up a more militant posture, assuring that tensions between them would escalate.

1.2.3. Syria's Response to the Iraq-Iran War 1980-1988

Following this period, both Iran and Syria held a shared view on Iraq, and after the dramatic events of 1979, tensions rose considerably between Iraq and Iran and then the supreme leader, Ayatollah Khomeini called on the Iraqi Shiites, who make up a staggering 60% of the total population, to rise up against the Baathist regime in Baghdad.²⁷ As can be expected, this rattled Saddam Hussein, and he saw it as a direct threat to the survival of his rule in Iraq and to his ambitions in the region. As this, all occurred during the aftermath of the shocking Egyptian betrayal

²⁶ Ehteshami, A. & Hinnebusch, R.A., 1997. *Syria and Iran: middle powers in a penetrated regional system*, London: Routledge., Pp-92

²⁷ Karsh, E., Introduction. *The Iran-Iraq War 1980-1988*, pp.12-13

of the Arab-Israeli struggle when they signed the Camp David accord in 1979. Saddam Hussein saw an attack on his neighbor, Iran as an opportunity increase his power in the region by expanding oil fields and with relations, as they were, it provided a chance to take on a dominant position and assume the role of the champion of Arab freedom. Saddam had two aims to fulfill by launching an invasion of Iran. Iran wanted to pull out of the Algiers accord signed in 1975 in which it had lost much in favor of Iran. Also, Baghdad was afraid of ripples spreading from the revolution of Iran.

In addition, one of Saddam Hussein's long-held ambitions at that time was to gain a dominant position in the Persian Gulf. Iraq had different financial and military capacities, and by succeeding over Egypt, Iraq planned to dominate the region. Therefore, the domestic turbulence inside Iran was taken by Saddam as an indication of Iran's inherent weakness, and he sought to capitalize on it, as at that time the Iranian military was drained by the purges, and also due to executions of several high-ranking pro shah military officers. The Ba'athists of Baghdad, observing this, grew more confident that in this situation a sweeping victory could be obtained by waging war against Iran and would not only topple the new revolutionary regime in Tehran but would also lead to Iraq emerging as the dominant power in the region.²⁸

The alliance of Iran and Syria during this period reflected a united view on Saddam's Iraq. In 1980, having pulled out of the Algiers accord and doing so virtually spelled a declaration of war on Iran and the government in Syria were growingly concerned onlookers as they viewed Iraq as one of the largest and most capable military powers in the region. Therefore, there was a very real concern regarding the developments and threat of a powerful Iraq in the Middle East. At first glance, it may appear inexplicable that two Baathist nations in the same region could have such conflicting policies, but when looked into further we see that both nations regarded each other more as competing rivals. The ideological rift in the

²⁸ Vergeni, Y. N., 2012. Causes of the Iran-Iraq War. , pp.127–128

Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party of 1966 saw it form into two warring factions, with one in Baghdad and the other in Damascus and a fierce rivalry ensued between the two states. Iraq giving asylum to Michel Aflaq, an exiled Syrian political figure, was another event that proved to inflame tensions in the relationship. Even with a short time of rapprochement between the two states during the 1978 Baghdad Conference, animosity dramatically resurfaced once again when Iraq pointed the finger at Syria for a coup plot, shortly before the onset of the Iran-Iraq War.²⁹

With Israel regarded as a more significant concern, Assad in Syria saw that Iran's conflict with Saddam's Iraq had left them unable to pay attention to Israel. Upon the outbreak of war between Iran and Iraq, Arab nations focused more on what they considered the growing threat from Iran in the region and shifted their focus away from the Israel and Palestine issue. For that reason, they were swift in support of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. But this meant that Damascus could not count on the same level of support for his struggle against Israel. So, this period marked a considerable drop in opposition to Israel from the Arab states who were pre-occupied with Iran as a more direct danger.

Initially, Syria was actually, hesitating at the start of the conflict, as to which position to take, either to place all its might behind Iran or to take the popular option and follow the other Arab nations but Assad always condemned the Iraqi invasion and called the war, "the wrong war against the wrong enemy at the wrong time". So, Assad strongly denounced the war and simply saw it as creating more enmity amongst the Arabs, diverting them from the higher cause of uniting to fight for the holy lands in Palestine.³⁰

At the same time, Assad could not accept being sandwiched between the two hostile states of Israel and Iraq. Israel was viewed by Syria as the main enemy and Iraq were more of an ideological rival because they represented a different interpretation of Baathist socialism, that had caused deep enmity to and in order for

²⁹ Iran-Syria Relations. 2016. -. Available at: <http://internationalrelations.org/iran-syria-relations/> [Accessed November 18, 2017]

³⁰ Seale, P., 1990. *Asad: the struggle for the Middle East*. Univ of California Press. Pp. 357-358

Syria to repel these two major threats, Assad decided to review his approach to the Iran-Iraq war and he subsequently placed his support firmly on the Iranian side. Assad's support for Iran took on several forms including, Military, Financial and Diplomatic assistances in order to prevent Saddam's Iraq from coming out on top.

Firstly and foremost, Shortly before the war the new Iranian regime had asked for military support from Assad in Damascus but because he feared the political backlash and a negative reaction from the other states in the region and from his own people he, therefore, was reluctant but then Assad many long meetings with forging envoys from Iran he ended up agreeing on militarily assisting Iran and this assistance initially took the form of shipping substantial weaponry to Iran, including SAM-7 ground to Air missiles RPG, Sagger, anti-tank rockets, and missiles.³¹

Moreover, Syria became the conduit for the shipment of Soviet weapons to Iran, and in the April of 1981, Syria provided its air space from which Iranian fighter jets could carry out air strikes against the Iraqi air force which caused 15-20 percent of Iraq's Air force to be destroyed. Most seriously, was that on a number of occasions, Syrian military jets violated Iraqi air space during this time and also, with the stepping up of support that Syria strategically gave to rebel groups in Iraq, providing military aid and collective training camps, the tables started to turn against Saddam. To mount up pressure on Saddam and generate chaos from inside Iraq, Syria made sure plenty of weapons got to both the Kurdish insurgents and the communist party, who were bitterly opposed to Saddam.³²

Secondly, when it came to Financial support and Assistance, Hirschfeld mentions that Syria's assistance for Iran was deliberately intended to damage the Iraqi economy and when the Iranian were not able of breaking the stalemate by means of their military, they ramped up their strategic economic assault. The Syrian regime managed to shut down the Iraqi pipeline that had been operating since 1970

³¹ Goodarzi, J.M., 2009. *Syria and Iran: diplomatic alliance and power politics in the Middle East*, London: Tauris Academic Studies. Pp. 33-34

³² Hirschfeld, Yair, Maoz, M., 2014. *Syria under Assad: domestic constraints and regional risks*, Routledge. Pp:107 check the new edited version published in 2014.

with a capacity of 554000 (PDP) barrels per day equivalent to 27,700,000 annually transferred oil to the Syrian Terminal of Baniyas and then to the Lebanese city of Tripoli. With the pipeline closed, Iraqi saw a massive annual decrease of 6\$ billion in its income.³³

The Iraqi economy and its spending power were hit hard, and in response, Saddam started to consider its pipeline with Turkey to regenerate the economic situation which was suffering due to the actions of its Baathist rivals in Syria. The Baghdad regime expanded output of the Turkish pipeline from 650000 PBD to 1000000 PBD but it still not reaching the demand. To maintain its military fight against Iran, Iraq needed considerable financial support and did manage to obtain 20,000,000 Euro loans for the construction of pipelines to Jordan and Saudi Arabia. However, the cost of all this was that it made bubbles in the economy, which meant that the currency fell dramatically from 2 \$ billion to 36 \$ Billion.

The Iraqi government found themselves in a desperate situation as effective economic attacks from Syria meant a general deterioration in the economy, and therefore, both the Gulf States and the US gave additional loans to Iraq. Gulf countries supplied thirty-five billion dollars, and they provided even more by 1985. Saddam was forced to implement a program of austerity, due to significant losses of income and a seriously shrinking foreign currency reserve.

Because of these losses from which Iraq's economy was virtually crippled, Iran had hopes that, either the situation would lead to a major revolt against the regime in Baghdad or the loyalty of the people would gradually fade away and thus confidence in president would be lost, which would end up with the fall of Saddam Hussein. Syria and Iran both believed that the damage inflicted economically and militarily would topple Saddam's regime without the need for Iran to take the war deep inside Iraqi land.³⁴

Last but not least, along with the military and financial support, Syria was also generous in providing its new friend Iran with diplomatic support. Arab alliance

³³ Ibid check the pages from: 105-122

³⁴ ibid

against the Iranian regime was successfully stopped by Syria, following the onset of the war. In 1982, the summit of Amman was hosted by the king of Jordan, who was one of the closest allies of Saddam and Syria deployed 30,000 troops on its border with the Jordan and also sought to persuade other Arab states to avoid the summit.³⁵

Algeria, Libya, the People's Republic of Yemen and the PLO also boycotted the summit, but the summit went ahead, and Syria could certainly not stop the summit from taking place. Whereas Syria did manage to have a big effect on Arab states which saw them becoming divided into two camps, one side pro-Iran and the other anti-Iran which went on to form the GCC or (Gulf Co-operation Council) by Saudi Arabia.

The GCC or (Gulf Co-operation Council), founded in 1981, claims as its primary aim, the impeding of internal and external threats. Hirschfeld refutes that the GCC was formed for the opposing of both internal and external threats. Instead, he posits that the core aim was to form a robust anti-Iranian collation. Moreover, the GCC had more of an anti-Iranian agenda and also had the support of powerful states both the regionally and internationally, including the US. In May 1982, Syria for the second time attempted to prevent an anti-Iranian summit and then set up a pro-Iranian counter-summit in Damascus attended by Libyan and Iranian foreign ministers.³⁶

1.2.4. Syrian-Iranian Alignment during the Invasion of Lebanon 1982

When Israel invaded Lebanon, the years that followed represented a milestone in the modern history of the region. The events that unfolded in Lebanon tested the alliance of Syria and Iran, and the Axis of Resistance appeared to be, for the first time, at odds on various fronts with the looming prospect of a break in the alliance. 1982 proved to be a year of considerable importance for the future of the

³⁵ Goodarzi, J., 2013. Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation Changing Regional Environment., 4(2), pp.40–41.

³⁶ Hirschfeld, Yair, Maoz, M., 2014. *Syria under assad: domestic constraints and regional risks*: Routledge.Pp:109-110

alliance and most significantly, Syria and Iran, after close cooperation at the outbreak of the Gulf War, found themselves close partners again during the Lebanon situation.

With the general Ariel Sharon being appointed Minister of Defense, Israel made a bold move in the Lebanon conflict. The then Israeli Prime Minister, Menachem Begin planned an invasion of Lebanon in order to expel the PLO and to act as a lesson to Syria. Israel was also hoping to render Lebanon, a state with strong ties to Israel and therefore boost Israeli influence in the region.³⁷ The invasion into Lebanese territory, carried out by the Israeli army represented considerable military upsets, while at the same time it forced an increase in Lebanese-Iranian relations and most significantly resulted in the advent of Hezbollah. Syria certainly utilized Hezbollah to harm Israel's military and political agenda in Lebanon. Iran was also successful in using Hezbollah as a propaganda tool for spreading its brand of political Shiite revolutionary ideology throughout the region.

The Syria-Iran alliance, during this time, was quite seriously stretched and the Iranians contributions to the forming of Hezbollah, whilst neglecting the Syrian-backed Amal was one of the main reasons. Syria was not jumping for joy about Hezbollah and held an even suspicious stance towards them, but Iran was the sponsors of Hezbollah, playing a key part in their creation because Hezbollah as a Shiite ally of Iran, was an important military proxy for Iran in Lebanon. Syria had a position of authority in Lebanon regarding decisions about its political trajectory, so this was another reason for complications and difficulties regarding what Syria and Iran could agree on in Lebanon.

So, it is certainly a major point to note, that the armies of Iran and Syria managed to collaborate effectively with each other in Lebanon, following the Israeli invasion of 1982. Israel's invasion of southern Lebanon was felt in Damascus as a direct security threat and the US viewed Hafiz al-Assad as following the Soviet Union. Assad came up with a very effective strategy in response to this situation

³⁷ Goodarzi, J.M., 2006. *Syria and Iran: diplomatic alliance and power politics in the Middle East*, London: Tauris Academic Studies. Pp. 61

which was referred to as the Shield and Sword Strategy, with the shield meaning the defensive aspect for which he used the Soviets and the Sword meaning the offensive element, for which he utilized Iranian influence on the Shiite community of Lebanon.³⁸

When it was clear that the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) would stay in Lebanon, then Syria and Iran encouraged their Shiite militant groups to go in and attack. In 1982, one of the impressive things that happened was the relentless Guerilla warfare of the Shiite Lebanese militants abasing the Israelis and the Shiite population having no qualms about resorting suicide attacks. On November 11, in the city of Tyre, a suicide attack resulted in 67 dead Israeli soldiers. Iran joined in deploying ITS revolutionary Guards Quds Forces (IRGC-QF) to the Bekaa valley via Syria in order to oppose Israel and its imperialist agenda in the region.³⁹

1.2.5. Syria-Iran Relations after the US Invasion of Iraq 2003

The extraordinary spectacle of September 11 meant a world where the war terror was the main agenda, was to become divided into, according to the Bush administration, those who are with us or against us. In other words, those who would support the US's War on Terror and those who would not. Therefore, in the atmosphere of the aftermath of the famous attack on the Twin Towers in New York and the subsequent US lead invasion of Afghanistan, interestingly, both Syria and Iran supported the United States' counter-terrorism activities. The Islamic Republic financially and militarily aided the fight against the Taliban in Afghanistan. In 2002 Syria was hailed as a major CIA intelligence provider, giving a lot of priceless information to assist the intelligence operations on al-Qaida, which was to an end only with the invasion of Iraq in 2003.⁴⁰

Due to the US invasion of Iraq the following year, the diplomatic scenery shifted once more and both Syria and Iran became weary of how swiftly the

³⁸ Ibid see Pp. 75

³⁹ Ibid see Pp. 77-7

⁴⁰ Hersh, S.M., 2017. The Syrian Bet. Available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2003/07/28/the-syrian-bet> [Accessed April 6, 2018].

Americans had demolished the regime in Baghdad, while they were pleased to see the demise of a long-term foe, at the same time they knew very well how they could be next on the US hit list of the Americans, as Wallsh (2013) puts it in his own words: ⁴²

“For example, Richard Perle suggested as early as 2001 that the Syrians might be next on America’s hit list after Afghanistan and Iraq. And in April 2003, one month after the U.S. military invaded Iraq, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz warned: “[t]here will have to be changed in Syria, plainly.” In fact, even before September 11 nearly three dozen influential Washington figures, many of whom would play a role in the Bush era’s foreign policy, signed a report calling for military intervention in Syria”
Wallsh (2013) ⁴¹

Thereon, Assad began to refuse information to the CIA and assumed an adversarial stance towards Washington in general. The regime in Damascus started to assist the path of Sunni fighters heading for Iraq in order to oppose the American army and meanwhile Iran also started cultivating relations with the Shiites political parties in Iraq in a bid to push political factions into prominence who were friendly to Tehran and who stood a chance at becoming the new government. Yet the prospect of an out and out civil war in Iraq was something that nobody wanted, including Syria and Iran, so they had to tread carefully not to increase the already worsening situation. Therefore, both Syria and Iran agreed that as the US military presence continued to strengthen, they would take action against it.⁴²

Western assaults on both Syria and Iran on the Lebanese front occurred more and more and in 2005, with the killing of the former Lebanese president, Hariri, Saudi Arabia, and the USA took this as an opportunity deal a heavy blow to Syria and Hezbollah, Iran’s two main allies. The terrorist attack was the perfect

⁴¹ Wallsh, D. (2013). Syrian Alliance Strategy in the Post-Cold War Era: The Impact of Unipolarity. *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, Vol. 37, No. 2, pages 113-123

⁴² Goodarzi, J., 2013. Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation Changing Regional Environment. *Middle Eastern Studies/Ortadogu Etütleri*., 4(2), pp.47–48

justification for the West to force Syria out of Lebanon. But this move became a major game changer because it moved Assad ever closer to Hezbollah and Tehran, having been utterly infuriated by the forced withdrawal of 18000 troops. On 12 July 2006, Hezbollah triggered a war with Israel after kidnapping two Israeli soldiers and killing eight in a cross-border raid. All evidence pointed to the Syria-Iran axis of resistance being in full support of Hezbollah, regardless of both nation's official denial of US claims of their involvement in the conflict. The war went on to last only six weeks but was a considerable military breakthrough in the history of the Arab - Israeli conflict.⁴³

Hezbollah claimed victory and this claim was even echoed by some pundits at the time. Hezbollah's leader Nasrallah became one of the most popular figures Arab world, due to his successfully inflicting a defeat on the Israeli army. Both Syrian and Iranian standing in the region had been boosted and maybe even more significantly was the triple alliance that had been formed, giving Iran strategic depth in the core of the Arab world, with limited retaliatory capability against Israel.

1.3. Concluding Remarks

Over the last forty years, the relationship between Syria and Iran has managed to survive through all the changes and challenges in the Middle East during that time. Since the Islamic revolution of Iran in 1979, the region has seen significant changes but Damascus and Tehran have continued to work together in one way or another, maintaining and preserving their mutual alliance and have clearly emerged as the most enduring partnership of any nation in the Middle Eastern region, where alliances are hard to come by and often temporary.

The partnership between Syria and Iran can be said to have essentially a defensive purpose. It has primarily been motivated by a mutual requirement to guard against outside forces. The coalition that was established during the Iran-Iraq war and the 1982 Israeli-American coalition in Lebanon when Israel invaded Lebanon were examples of these strong external powers acting in the region. The

⁴³ For details check Coskun, G., 2016. *Syrian Iranian Relations During Bashar Al Assad Period: A Test Case for the Alliance Theories* check: page

religious solidarity of Shi'a Iran and the Shi'a Alawite sect of the Assad family is noted by scholars, but religious links are not the most influential factor in their alliance. Especially during the Iran - Iraq war, Syria's Pan-Arabist philosophy was avoiding the war being defined as a Shi'a bid to take over the Sunni majority.

After the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, it became clearer how much the alliance was of a defensive nature. At first Syria and Iran had taken a bandwagoning approach, offering assistance to the United States to fight terrorism. Following the events of 2003, Tehran and Damascus further strengthened their cooperation in order to combat the rising US influence in the region.

Finally, the historical overview proves how much the two countries initiatives and interests have been intertwined over the last 40 years, cementing an alliance which has been vital for the regional survival of both countries. Most importantly, Tehran sees Syria as the bedrock of the Corridor of Resistance, stretching from Iraq to Lebanon and Syria that it has built against the United States and Israel.

However, the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 constitutes a major challenge for the future of the alliance, threatening the survival of Iran's most important ally in the region. The outcome may have a more substantial impact on Iran than any other country in the Middle East. Therefore, the next two chapters will thus analyze the Iranian policy towards the Syrian War and the degree of Tehran's involvement in the conflict.

Chapter II

IRANIAN REACTION *VIS-À-VIS* THE UPRISINGS WITH A SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON SYRIA

When the Arab Spring, sprung out in Tunisia in the winter of 2010-2011 and subsequently rapidly spread across other states in the Arab world, Iran declared its sympathy and support for the protests against pro-Western regimes, painting the events as Islamic awakenings. Iran ambitiously claimed that there was a new era of pan-Islamic movements in the Middle East and North Africa, where oppressive anti-Islamic regimes would transform into Islamic governments. As Tehran saw it, the tide had finally turned against the West, and history seemed to be turning in favor of Iran and its supporters. However, this was to take another twist with the eruption of similar uprisings in Syria, which Iran had not anticipated, and which put Iran in a rather awkward position by throwing its support behind the Syrian regime. Hence, the problem of the peaceful Syrian protests then became the problem of a Civil War characterized by regional proxies with Iran taking an active role. The regional proxy war then became a proxy war of powerful global actors. In this respect, the purpose of this chapter in the first stage is to thoroughly analyze the Iranian Reaction *vis-à-vis* the Uprisings with a Special Emphasis on Syria, while in the second stage the chapter aims to set out an explanation of the Syrian crisis by taking into account all the Internal, Regional and International Dimensions.

2. GENERAL BACKGROUND

The Arab uprisings were assumed to be waves of demonstrations and protests which initially started in Tunisia on December 18, 2010, following the self-immolation of a hands-on salesman called Mohamed Bouazizi in protest to his ill-treatment by municipal officials which led to the escape and overthrow of the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia. The subsequent developments in Tunisia completely

changed the political landscape of North Africa and the Middle East by overthrowing pro-Western regimes.⁴⁴

The developments termed as the "Arab Spring," shaped the regional politics in early 2010 from North Africa and expanded to the Levant and the Gulf in a matter of weeks. Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, and then Bahrain and Yemen were all hit by these upheavals. Although it has been claimed by the Iranian regime that these developments in the region are the continuation of Islamic awakening, this term, however, was rejected by many political analysts. It is believed that all these upheavals in the region, starting in 2010 in Tunisia grew out of many common grievances such as political repression, lack of freedom, corruption, unemployment, and no democratic rights. These developments, which were a unique phenomenon in this geopolitical region, affected the foreign policy of all regional actors, including the Islamic Republic of Iran.⁴⁵

In a Friday prayer sermon in Tehran the Supreme Leader, Grand Ayatollah Khamenei, asserted that the primary factor behind these uprisings was the feeling of humiliation that has been imposed forcefully by their puppet leaders who had been dependent on US and Israel. According to the supreme leader, the world was neglecting the fact that these developments are the continuation of the Islamic Revolution of 1979.⁴⁶

Furthermore, the beginning of the Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa has paved the way for a change in power equations. Ben Ali's retreat from Tunisia and the fall of Mubarak in Egypt were enough to shake the Saudi axis in the region and seriously threaten Israel's security. On the other hand, Turkey and Iran, as the two leading regional powers, were prepared to redefine their position in

⁴⁴ Salih, K.E.O., 2013. The Roots and Causes of the 2011 Arab Uprisings. *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 35(2), pp.184–189.

⁴⁵ Chubin, S., 2012. Iran and the Arab Spring: Ascendancy Frustrated. , pp.15–19.

⁴⁶ Speech of Ayatollah Khamenei: امروز انعکاس صدای ملت ایران در شمال آفریقا و دیگر نقاط جهان اسلام شنیده می‌شود. 2011. Available at: <http://hamshahrionline.ir/details/127286/Iran/leader> [Accessed April 23, 2018].

light of these changes and they welcomed the fall of the Ben Ali regime, and in the meantime, they demanded Mubarak to resign from his post.⁴⁷

The initial response of the Islamic Republic of Iran to these changes in the region was positive. Iran had its calculations; it believed that an Islamic type of government would take the place of the pro-Western regimes. It also felt that these Islamic governments would not only boost the Iranian position in the region, but they would also adopt a hostile and antagonistic policy toward Israel and the US. Moreover, Tehran thought that even if an Islamist government did not come to power, it would still see Iran in a unique position because any weakening of US allies in the region such as Egypt would magnify Iran's regional influence.⁴⁸

In a profound sense, Iran had two different stances, in North Africa and the Gulf, Tehran, with the use of "Islamic Awakening," expressing its joy at the developments. While in Levant Iran had contradictory positions which both are going to be elaborated in the following way.

2.1. Iranian Stance towards the Uprisings in North Africa

Tehran, in North Africa, celebrated the collapse of the pro-Western regimes of Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak. Tehran deemed the Protests in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya as an "Islamic Awakening." At those initial phases, it responded to the protests in Egypt and Tunisia with encouragement. The fall of those regimes were significant for Iran because, on the one hand, it bolstered the Iranian position in the region and on the other hand, it weakened the once strategic allies of the West and Israel, thus paving the way for Iran to project its power and to maneuver freely in the region. Iran, by then, believed that it had exported the revolutionary ideologies to North Africa which gave Iranian officials great optimism in early 2011.

⁴⁷ Qadari, A., 2012. "بهار عربی" و هزینه هایی که ایران و ترکیه دادند. Available at: <http://www.asriran.com/fa/news/211306/بهار-عربی-و-هزینه-هایی-که-ایران-و-ترکیه-دادند> [Accessed April 27, 2018].

⁴⁸ Mohseni, P., 2013. The Islamic Awakening: Iran's Grand Narrative of the Arab Uprisings. *Middle East Brief*, pp.1–9.

Also, the retreat of Ben Ali from Tunisia and the fall of Mubarak in Egypt shook the Saudi axis in the region and threatened Israel's security. Iran, as one of the leading regional powers, was prepared to shift its position in relation to these events. Iran's welcoming of the fall of the Ben Ali regime and the resignation of Mubarak were echoed by Turkey at the beginning of the upheavals, with the only difference being that the Turk's support was welcomed, and Iranian support was met with a significant degree of cynicism due to long-held Arab sensitivities toward Iran. In the meantime, Iranian leaders, with the use of the term "Islamic Awakening," expressed their joy in these developments. The fall of Mubarak in Egypt for Iran meant the withdrawal of Saudi Arabia's strategic alliance from the equation and the shattering of Israel's security.⁴⁹ In strategic terms, the subsequent ousting of Muhammad Morsi and the political sidelining of the Muslim Brotherhood was another severe blow to Iran's Islamic-awakening narrative of post-Arab Spring developments.

In the case of Libya, historically, relations between Iran and Libya had maintained ever since 1979, and it is said that Libya was among the first Arab nations to throw its support behind Iran in its war against Iraq in 1980-88 and both countries had common policies toward Israel. Moreover, through this period, contrary to its Arab brethren, Libya was not critical of Iranian foreign policy in the region. However, their relations sunk to some degree after the disappearance of the Iranian Shiite leader Musa al Sadr. In an official visit to Libya in 1978, Musa al Sadr disappeared, which arose serious tensions between the two countries. Ever since Iran and Libya maintained on and off diplomatic relations.⁵⁰

With the start of the demonstrations and ensuing military conflict in Libya, Western countries, including the GCC members and Turkey, put their support behind the protesters. But in Tehran, there was still no serious reaction, it welcomed

⁴⁹ Statements about the Arab spring from the Iranian officials: *امروز انعکاس صدای ملت ایران در شمال* / *آفریقا و دیگر نقاط جهان اسلام شنیده می‌شود*, 2011. Available at: <http://hamshahronline.ir/details/127286/Iran/leader> [Accessed April 23, 2018].

⁵⁰ Nikou, S., 2011. Iran Backs Libyan Rebels, Chastises West Over Oil, Bahrain. *Iran and Lebanon / The Iran Primer*.

the legitimate demands of the Libyan people, but at the same time, it did not support NATO's intervention in Libya.⁵¹

Iran had accepted the fact that the Gaddafi regime was crumbling quickly, and it would allow Iran to maintain close and friendly relations with a new regime that would have a favorable stance toward Iran. Therefore, Iran ended up placing support behind protestors while at the same, it remained cautious of the Western countries' motives in Libya. Iran believed that the West mainly the US may use the protection of civilians as a pretext for its intervention in Libya which would not only manipulate the process of regime change in Libya but would also install a puppet regime that would be dependent on the West.⁵²

Therefore, the NATO military invasion of Libya on March 19, 2011, to topple Moammar Qaddafi was a setback for Iran, but it produced close relations with the prospective regime in Tripoli and the West. Therefore, according to Iranian thought, the West had "hijacked" the revolutionary movement of the Libyan people.⁵³

Political analysts also underline the fact that the Iranian policy in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya was based on preserving its interest. For Iran, Egypt, as one of the pioneers of the Arab nations, has an extraordinary place in its foreign policy. After the fall of Hosni Mubarak, Iran tried to maintain a closer relationship with the new government, However, things changed when President Morsi came to power, he was a critique of Iranian intervention in Syria as seen in his speeches in which he was clearly condemning Iranian involvement in Syria.⁵⁴ NATO intervention plus Morsi's speech provoked a mass reaction from the Iranian side, thus leading Iran to lose its hopes in North Africa.

⁵¹ Nejat, S.A., 2015. رویکرد سیاست خارجی جمهوری اسلامی ایران در قبال تحولات نوین خاورمیانه. , pp.61–75.

⁵² Bayyenat, A., 2011. Iran Diplomacy Watch. *Iran-Libya*. Available at: <http://www.irandiplomacywatch.com/search/label/Iran-Libya> [Accessed May 27, 2018].

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ Barzegar , K., 2011. Iran's Interests and Values and the 'Arab Spring'. *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*. And check Alibabalu, S.S., 2017. Iranian Perspective on Egyptian Revolution: From Optimism to Despair. *Modern Diplomacy*.

Overall, the Iranian regime welcomed the establishment of the new government in North Africa. However; its relations remained limited contrary to its expectations. Iran had hoped that with the establishment of the new regimes in North Africa, they would gain the upper hand, but this was not to be so.

2.2. Iranian Stance towards the Uprisings in the Gulf and Levant

The Islamic Republic of Iran, in general, assessed the developments in the Gulf particularly in Yemen and Bahrain along with others in the North Africa, Libya, Tunisia and Egypt in the form of Islamic awakening, which deposed Western influence in the region. Iran in the Gulf supported the ouster of the pro-Saudi and Western regimes and accused both the leaders of Yemen; Ali Abdullah Saleh and the Bahraini King Sheikh Hamad of not responding to the reasonable demands of their citizens.

With respect to Yemen, Iran's priorities were focused on preserving its interests. Yemen bears significance for Iran because of its location in the backyard of its opponent, Saudi Arabia. Yemen has remained a battleground for both the Wahhabi regime of Saudi Arabia and the Iranian regime of the Shiite Mullahs.⁵⁵

Saudi Arabia and Iran have also had serious disputes over the Yemeni government and the Houthi minority who live in the northern province of Saada. Government leaders from Saudi Arabia and Yemen had repeatedly accused Iran of supporting the Houthis with financial and military assistance via the Quds Forces of the IRGC. The Houthis who follow five imams differ from mainstream Shiites who follow twelve imams; nevertheless, the Houthis in Yemen are considered a legitimate branch of the Shiite by the Ayatollahs of Iran. Therefore, Saudi and Yemeni government officials have repeatedly accused Tehran of seeking to divert the Houthis from their mainstream principle toward a more militant Shiite Twelver religion.⁵⁶ Shahram Chubin (2012), in his article, argues that one of Iran's primary

⁵⁵ Barzegar , K., 2011. Iran's Interests and Values and the 'Arab Spring'. *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*.

⁵⁶ Terrill, W.A., 2011. The Saudi Iranian Rivalry and the Future of Middle East Security., pp.19–25.

concern in Yemen was to curb and pressure Saudi influence. While at the same time, Tehran believed supporting the Yemeni opposition would help Iran to influence the strategic straight of the Bab Al Mandeb.⁵⁷

Meanwhile, in the case of Bahrain, Iran viewed the Bahraini protests as “the right revolution in the right place.” Bahrain’s developments broke out with the gathering of several senators against the Egyptian embassy in Manama and announced their support for the Egyptian revolution and then planned for an anti-government protest in February.

Likewise, the regional actors and trans-national powers’ attitude toward Bahrain's developments differed in terms of the specific goals and interests of each of them in the Persian Gulf region. The Islamic Republic of Iran's policy toward Bahrain is different from other developments in the Arab world. Based on a combination of interests and values because on the one hand, Bahrain is at the political-security field of Iran and on the other hand, it is at the strategic and sensitive area of the Persian Gulf. Bahrain is the regional ally of the conservative Arab countries and a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council. The United States also has military bases in Bahrain, while it has historically been claimed by Iran as part of its territory. And more interestingly, most of the Bahraini population is Shiite, making Iran naturally sympathetic toward the Shiite community in Bahrain.⁵⁸

As the crisis intensified, Bahraini authorities declared a state of martial law and knocked on the doors of other Gulf countries for help and military assistance. On March 14, 2011, Saudi Arabia and UAE, in total, deployed around 1500 troops in Bahrain to help the Bahraini King Hamad in his attempt to quell the peaceful protesters. In order to justify their interventions in Bahrain, Bahraini officials claimed that the Gulf Cooperation Council has been working to help Bahrain in preventing Iranian influence in its domestic policies.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Chubin, S., 2012. Iran and the Arab Spring: Ascendancy Frustrated., pp.15–19.

⁵⁸ Ibid Terrill, W.A., 2011. pp.19–25.

⁵⁹ Ibid

Iran responded to Saudi military intervention in Bahrain backed by the GCC states with anger, Iran designated the Saudi intervention in Bahrain as an occupation of a country, and it further called on the UN to stop the killing of Bahraini people. In addition, the Iranian supreme leader accused the Al Khalifa family of suppressing the voices of the innocent Shiite population. He additionally stated that it is the legal right of the people to protests against their government. In the meantime, he also warned the Bahraini regime of having embraced a wrong policy toward its people, and Iran for the sake of protecting these people will not sit silent and such repression will be faced with a harsh response.⁶⁰

However, in Bahrain, Iran is accused of taking advantage of the Shiite denomination of the Bahraini people, Iran primary purpose of in Bahrain was to narrow down the American presence as it is home to a US military base. To do so, Iran in Bahrain used the mantra of protecting the Shiite population from the dictator by putting its support behind the protestors.⁶¹ However, currents reversed unexpectedly against Iranian dreams in Bahrain when the Saudi led collation forces intervened. Therefore, the Saudi intervention was considered a significant blow to the Iranian position, limiting Iranian efforts in Bahrain. Thus, the course of developments shattered the initial optimism of Iran towards the Arab Spring and turned it into a formidable challenge for Iran.

Furthermore, the first challenge raised by the Arab Spring for Iran was the spread of a Revolutionary wave into Syria on March 16, 2011. The ruling Baath regime in Syria is the long-time and only ally of Iran among the Arab states. Iran did not lose time in depicting the growing opposition against the Assad administration as a plot of the enemies of the Islamic Awakening. The Iranian leadership regards resistance to Israel and the American hegemony as the most important characteristic of Islamic awakening. Therefore, any rebellion against the regime part of the resistance front were deemed illegitimate such as in the case of the Assad administration, which Tehran sees it as a part of the “Resistance Front”

⁶⁰ Akhlaghi , R., 2011. Iran's Foreign Policy vis-à-vis Arab Uprisings. *Foreign Policy Blogs*.

⁶¹ Andrew, T.W., 2015. Iran's Strategy for Saving Asad. *The Middle East Journal*, pp.222–236.

against the “Israeli occupation” and the American hegemony, thus it was unacceptable to the Iranian leadership to see a regime change in Syria supported by the West and Israel.

Overall, in the Levant especially in the Syrian crisis, Iran's policy is primarily based on maintaining strategic interests and its place in the region's political-security equilibrium, especially in the area of relations with Hezbollah and Hamas, as well as the Arab-Israeli peace process, in which Iran plays a critical role. Syria plays a vital role in Iran's strategic ties in the Mediterranean and the Near East.

2.3. Evolution of the Syrian Crisis

When looking at the Syrian uprisings, it can be observed that in the beginning, people protested because of the hardships they had been suffering for decades. Despite Bashar al Assad pushing for change, no concrete reforms were introduced. Therefore, scholars have proposed various theories to explain the origin of the unrest in Syria. Most scholars make a distinction between some of the factors at work which sparked the crisis in Syria and those of Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Bahrain, and Yemen. While all these countries shared common problems, with the Syrian crisis, scholars also point to other determinants that all together triggered unrest in Syria, such as a dramatic shift in socio-economic factors and draught.

In case of the Syrian protests, Kristen L. Davis (2015); proposes that considering the Syrian crisis many suggest various factors as mentioned above such as corruption, limited political participation, limited freedom, and poverty, etc. However, along with all these factors, he also blames draught or water scarcity for the evolution of the Syrian crisis. Kristen L. Davis (2015), believes that water scarcity forced people, mostly the Sunni population to migrate to other cities changing the demographics of the cities and causing poverty as a result.⁶²

Meanwhile, there are other scholars such as Bonfatti (2017), who blame

⁶² Davis, K.L., 2015. *The expanding nature of the Syrian Civil War: from poor policy to regional conflict*. thesis. Page No: 9

unjust economic policies for the ignition of the Syrian crisis. It is said that Bashar al Assad followed in his father's footsteps by further hastening neoliberal policies that only privileged the inner circle of Assad.⁶³

Overall, Christopher Philips (2018), in his book under the title of "The battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the new Middle East," sums up the Syrian crisis by implying that when Bashar al Assad came to power, he attempted to increase his popularity. Assad, contrary to his father who was living in the Syrian presidential palace, high on the top of Damascus, opted to live among the community in a modest apartment and was only using his father's castle for official visits and functions. Moreover, in contrast to his father, Assad was easily approachable with less security, driving his car in the urban areas, giving the Syrian president Bashar Al Assad modest fame among Syrians.⁶⁴

After his father died, Assad vowed in his inauguration speech to be more democratic and open and promised to pave the way for more political participation for his citizens. He also stated in an interview with CNN that he would be different from his father, "I shall try my very best to lead our country toward a future that fulfills the hopes and legitimate ambitions of our people."⁶⁵

In the meantime, he also vowed to make reforms in the field of economy. Following his takeover, he launched a five-year plan in 2006, private banks were allowed to operate, an increase in the FDI or Foreign Direct Investment prompted growth in the GDP at the rate of 12%, and it doubled from 27.9 billion to 60.1 billion USD between the years of 2005 and 2010.

However, problems still existed despite his hard push to change the regime's image among people. Christopher Philips (2018) calls, Assad push for

⁶³ Bonfatti, A., 2017. The socio-economic roots of Syria's uprising. *AlJumhuriya.net*. Available at: <https://www.aljumhuriya.net/en/content/socio-economic-roots-syria's-uprising> [Accessed May 22, 2018].

⁶⁴ Phillips, C., 2018. *The battle for Syria: international rivalry in the new middle east*, New Haven and: Yale University Press. Page-40

⁶⁵ Wilkinson, P. & Smith-Spark, L., 2013. Syrias Bashar al-Assad: President defined by violence. *CNN*. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2013/08/28/world/meast/syria-assad-profile/> [Accessed May 22, 2018].

change as a “murky reality” in which Assad unsuccessfully attempted to change the regime’s image. Assad, contrary to his father, promoted family members into the key positions such as his brother Maher, and his brother in law Asif Shawkat and his cousin Asif Makhlouf. Despite his promise in his inauguration, no political opening was pursued, political parties were restricted as usual except from one loyalist party, the Syrian nationalist party, which was also dominated by the Baath party. Members of dissident parties most notably members of the Muslim Brotherhood and many liberal leaders were punished and put in jail.

Moreover, the state of emergency law was still in place since 1963, and the regime feared from every single citizen. Therefore, it had dispatched Mukhabarat or the secret police trained by the Eastern German police. The Mukhabarat using the tactics of the East German police were vital in keeping watch over people and dissidents. These agents of Mukhabarat were famous for the persecution and torture of the civilians. When the Syrian crisis first broke out, people had really had enough of the Mukhabarat (agents). Therefore, the actions of the Mukhabarat was the primary target of their anger.

Furthermore, the author also blames the sudden shift of the socialist economy to a more capitalist economy in which the government had a nepotistic agenda. People having close links to Assad or people of the inner circle of Assad benefited from the economic reforms, while the poor were deprived of their rights. Corruption and nepotism were at a peak, specific families, including Assad’s cousins, had a significant stake in the economy while others were simply banned from entering into the market.

Contrary to Hafiz al Assad who had Sunnis placed in key roles equally with Alawites, Bashar instead sidelined the Sunni members of the Baath party, and he only allowed the Alawite members of his community to take critical places in the regime civil and security apparatuses. Alawite - Sunni tension remained high and unfair discrimination was noted in many areas such as in the city of Homs, Alawites enjoyed more privileges and were provided jobs by the government in contrast to their Sunni countrymen. Therefore, it is believed that the sectarian division between

Alawites and Sunnis also played a crucial role in fueling the Syrian uprising in 2011 against the regime of Bashar al Assad.⁶⁶

Overall, various factors such as socioeconomic, Political, sectarian tension, poverty, and unjust wrong economic policies are all believed to have motivated the Syrian people to revolt against the regime in 2011. However, it is equally important to find out what factors shifted the peaceful Syrian revolution into a civil war? In order to answer this question, it is important to study the Syrian uprising in three different dimensions (Internal, Regional, and International) as in the following way.

2.3.1. Internal Dimensions

In the early days of 2011, people across Syria took to the streets to demand for the release of the prisoners and more civil rights. Syrians from across the country gathered in front of Egyptian and Tunisian embassies to show their solidarity with the Egyptian and Tunisian demonstrators. Initially, numerous calls for demonstrations were made in Syria without much response. However, the matter of the Syrian crisis escalated when in early 2011 people took to the streets in various cities, including provincial towns such as Homs, Deraa, Idlib, Telkalakh, and Tafas. It was the protest in southern Derra that would ignite the revolution among Syrians. A traditionally Sunni province which in the past it had its support behind the regime, but several factors such as the Economic hardships, Drought, and Negligence of the government triggered waves of rebellion in the city.⁶⁷

In March 2011, a group of teenagers and schoolboys were arrested for painting anti-Bashar graffiti slogans, “Down with Bashar Al Assad” on their school walls in Derra. They were captured and subjected to torture by the regime; their fingernails being ripped out. When their parents demanded their immediate release, a cousin of Bashar, Atef Najib, told the families to forget their children and make new ones or let him have their wives so that he could make new ones for them. Therefore, families whose pleas were ridiculed and ignored, arranged a massive

⁶⁶ Ibid: Phillips, C., 2018. Page-47-48

⁶⁷ Yassin-Kassab, R. & Al-Shami, L., 2018. *Burning country: Syrians in revolution and war*, London: Pluto Press. Available page 37-38

protest outside the Derra central Omari mosque. Security forces used live ammunition and tears gas, killing four protestors. The next day at the funeral of those killed in the protest, more people joined the demonstrations chanting the anti-regime slogan, and they set fire to the office of Syriatel and the Baath Party in Derra.⁶⁸

Large segments of the Syrian people, including middle-income, wealthy and poor people, joined the protestors. In July 500,000 people gathered in Hama's al Assay square to protest against the regime. In response, the regime responded very harshly to demonstrations in cities such as Homs, Deraa, Banias, Telkalakh, Tafas, Rastan and elsewhere in the country. Troops supported by massive military tanks were deployed in some major cities to prevent people from reaching to the major squares. While in other cities such as Homs and Idlib, the regime conducted a massive military operation against the protestors by using helicopter gunships and armored tanks killing dozens and forcing thousands to flee to neighboring Turkey.⁶⁹

As the deadly protests continued, the government took harsh measures in Derra by cutting electricity and water and mobile phone networks. However, none of these preventative measures could stop the protestors. Initially, the protests were not all about the overthrow of the regime. Instead, most of the Syrian protestors demanded reforms. Therefore, some political commentators underline the fact that Bashar Assad could have contained the initial phase of the crisis by taking the example of Jordan's approach towards the protestors, in Jordan, the monarchy had ordered the police well treat the protestors and avoid clashing with them.⁷⁰

However, in Syria, Bashar and his Generals refused to show any sympathy towards the protestors; instead, they used force to disperse the demonstrators, which as a result triggered bitter feelings of revenge for protestors such as in the case of Derra where regime forces exaggerated in torturing the peaceful protestors. When

⁶⁸ Phillips, C., 2018. *The battle for Syria: international rivalry in the new middle east*, New Haven and: Yale University Press. Page-48-49

⁶⁹ Ibid: Phillips, C., 2018 page 66-67

⁷⁰ Phillips, C., 2018. Page-47-50

people in other parts of Syria learned about the events and the regime's brutality in Derra, they took to the streets against the regime. Therefore, it is claimed that government violence and its killing of its own people were accountable for triggering the cycle of the violence that soon turned into an ongoing Civil War.⁷¹

In the meantime, the situation further escalated when Assad in a speech in 2011 called the protestors "germs" who are being led by criminal gangs and jihadist rebels supported by outside powers. Assad, in the meantime, continued his call for national dialogue while he also continued cracking on the protestors. Therefore, it resulted in people joining the demonstrators to seek personal revenge for their family members killed by the regime.⁷²

Moreover, as the tide of the situation waned against Assad, the regime opted for a sectarian policy to win over the support of the minorities. Syria is a heterogeneous country; home to various religious groupings such as Christians, Alawites, Kurds, Ismailis, Druze, and many more. The government was able to cleverly exploit this by playing its sectarian card to gain support from the minority groups. When looking at the case of minorities, one can understand the fact that minorities in Syria enjoyed full freedom, and therefore, they saw the fall of Assad as costly and dangerous for them. Thus, the minority groups, mainly of the Alawite and Christians threw their full support behind the regime by deploying some of its groups with the Syrian army in their fighting against the rebels or Sunni protestors in particularly.⁷³

Furthermore, among one of the most important internal dimensions of the Syrian Civil war was the defection of the Syrian military officers. As the war in Syria escalated some of the high, and low-level officers defected to the protestors' side by forming a paramilitary force what would later emerge as Free Syrian Army (FSA), under the leadership of Col. Riad al-Asaad in Antakya, Turkey.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Rabinovich, I., 2017. *The Syrian Civil War as a Global Crisis.*, p.45

⁷² Phillips, C., 2018. *The battle for Syria: international rivalry in the new middle east*, New Haven and: Yale University Press. Page-66

⁷³ Malantowicz, A., 2013. Civil war in Syria and the new wars debate. *Amsterdam LF*, 5, p.56.

⁷⁴ Baas, S., 2016. *Syria's Armed Opposition.*, pp.1–11.

Although debated, it is said that in order to show the world a different image of the Syrian crisis, Bashar al Assad kept his eyes blind on the activities of the Syrian hardline groups in Syria. Therefore, it is believed that in an attempt to manipulate the real face of the Syrian protests, Bashar al Assad would release hundreds of hardline Islamists. Thus, after the unrest, various jihadi groups emerged most notably the Syrian Jabhatu Al Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, advocating a vicious sectarian agenda against the Alawites.⁷⁵

Overall, the Syrian war protests inspired by the Arab spring started in Damascus and other cities that turned violent after the deadly events of the teenagers that were killed and tortured by the Assad regime. People, in the beginning, wanted a change and reforms in the political system, in the initial phases of the demonstrations protestors never sought regime change. However, there were a number of internal factors that later paved the way for the evolution of the Syrian War.

2.3.2. Regional Dimensions

Regional dimensions, likewise, the internal dimensions are also considered to have a vital role in the evolution of the Syrian civil war. At first glance, all regional actors faced a lack of bandwidth; they did not know whether to put their support behind Assad or the rebels. Therefore, initially, some of the regional actors advised the Syrian president to listen to his people. However, none of these advices were taken seriously. Therefore, the situation immediately changed the situation changed in the policies of both regional and transregional players. Most of these countries made a U-turn in their policies towards the Syrian regime, making Syria as a major hub of competition and a proxy war bred ground for regional and international players.

Although on the ground, Syrians fought in the battles, regional actors had significant stakes in shaping the Syrian Civil War. Confrontation among various

⁷⁵ Laub, Z., 2018. Syria's War: The Descent into Horror. *Council on Foreign Relations*. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/interactives/syrias-civil-war-descent-into-horror#!/syrias-civil-war-descent-into-horror> [Accessed May 27, 2018].

regional actors generated two opposing fronts, the first consisting of Iran, Iraq on the state level and the Lebanese Hezbollah on the non-state level, while on the other hand in the second front there was Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey, all offering their support to the rebels. Beside major regional actors, there are other players such as Israel, the Kurds, and Jordan, who also have stakes in the Syrian civil war, yet their roles are assumed to be limited to narrow interests.

Moreover, one can firmly claim that Israel should be included in the regional dimension. However, Israeli involvement during the initial stages of the crisis remained aloof. If not indifferent, Israeli reaction became conspicuous in the later stages of the Syrian crisis and sought to check Iran and Hezbollah's encroachments in the Golan Heights, an area under Israeli occupation since the 1967 war.

The Regional dimension consists of three regional groups of countries that have played a vital role over the course of the crisis: The Gulf in the south, Iran in the East and Turkey in the North. Regionally with no doubt, the competition among the countries mentioned earlier led the Syrian crisis to an ongoing civil war.

In regard to the role of the Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, each had significant stakes in the evolution of the Syrian civil war. First and foremost, when the Syrian uprising broke out, the house of Saud was preoccupied with its own problems. The uprisings in North Africa also encouraged some of the Saudi citizens to protest against the monarchy. Initially, the Saudi authorities responded to the protests with violence and detentions of the protestors. In some parts of the country, the presence of the security forces was increased for the sake of precautions. However, to calm down the protestors, the Saudi monarchy, in the later stages, took some cautious steps by announcing \$130 Billion investments in various sectors and this seemed to some degree effective in silencing the protestors. The monarchy's plan was largely successful as it tackled unemployment, and it also increased the income of the people. However, problems still existed in the Eastern Shiite region with most of the Saudi Shiites feeling betrayed due to the monarchy's discriminatory stance against them. The Saudi Shiites repeatedly took to the streets,

causing a headache for the Monarchy. The monarchy regarded these protests as a threat to their rule, therefore, to stop the spread of the Arab spring before it arrived on the Saudi shore, the monarchy acted very carefully in the case of Syria.⁷⁶

The Saudi monarchy initially kept its silence over Assad's actions against his people. Riyadh believed it was best to stick at encouraging Assad to introduce some cosmetic reforms. The monarchy also announced millions of dollars in loans to the Syrian regime on the condition that Assad ceases his crackdown on the protestors. Even on the personal level, King Abdullah sent his son Prince Abdul Aziz bin Abdullah three times to Damascus to encourage Assad to introduce reforms in the whole system.⁷⁷ However, Saudi's stance gradually changed over time when Bashar al Assad ignored offers both at a state and personal level. It was in August 2011, when the Saudi king called Assad's crackdowns on the protestors a breach of Islamic values, and he urged Assad to "stop the killing machine." He also said as "Large numbers of martyrs have fallen, their blood has been shed, and many others have been wounded," and this must stop immediately or face harsher measures from the Arab league.⁷⁸

As Saudi lost hope in advising the Syrian president, Iran seemed to be the beneficiary of the Syrian crisis. After the initial stages of the uprising, Iran had sent its Revolutionary Guards or the IRGC-Quds forces to Syria on an advisory mission to help Assad in quelling the peaceful protestors. The Iranian presence meant a significant blow to the Saudis regional interests. Therefore, the monarchy genuinely became concerned about Iranian involvement in Syria. The Saudis believed that Iran might expand its influence in the region by taking advantage of instability in the Arab states. Therefore, it entered into a proxy war with Iran and with no doubt, the Syrian uprising turned into a proxy war for supremacy between regional player,

⁷⁶ Steinberg, G., 2014. Leading the Counter-Revolution Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring., p.7.

⁷⁷ Phillips, C., 2016. *The battle for Syria: international rivalry in the new Middle East*. Yale University Press. Page-68

⁷⁸ Dehghanpisheh, B., 2011. Saudi King Abdullah Condemns Syrian Presidency Bashar al-Assad's Regime. *The Daily Beast*. Available at: <https://www.thedailybeast.com/saudi-king-abdullah-condemns-syrian-presideny-bashar-al-assads-regime> [Accessed June 1, 2018].

notably the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Iran. For Riyadh, it was essential to push back Iranian influence in the region.⁷⁹

Thus, at the end of 2011, Saudi Arabia had expressed its support for the rebels, its support not only meant to fight Assad, but it also entailed a concerted effort to curb Iranian influence in the region. Therefore, to combat Iran's agenda, Saudi Arabia approached the Syrian issue both at a financial and diplomatic level. Although there are no Saudi troops deployed to Syria, Saudi Arabia has steadily provided both diplomatic and financial support for rebels in their fight against the regime of Bashar al Assad.

Overall, Saudi views the Syrian conflict through the Iranian lens; The Saudi's fear of Iranian influence in the region meant they strongly opposed Assad taking the side of Iran and Saudi Arabia has accused Iran of taking advantage of the instability in Syria by expanding its power in the Levant, particularly in Syria and Lebanon. Therefore, to resist these challenges in the region, the house of Saud adopted a confrontational tone in their policy towards the Syrian regime.⁸⁰

Meanwhile, like the Saudi Kingdom, Qatar did not at first rush to abandon Assad because of some specific reasons, firstly, during the years before the uprising in 2011, Doha had maintained good diplomatic relations with Syria. Secondly, Doha had invested millions of Dollars in the Syrian economy. Therefore, there was no prompt response from the Qatari side to the uprising in 2011. Like, the Saudi king, the Qatari Emir Hamad sent his son Prince Tamim to Syria to advise Assad to end the violence. Similar approaches were also made by the Emir's daughter, to the Syrian president's wife Asma, but all they ended fruitlessly. Qatar, like Saudi at the beginning, promised Assad help with the condition that Assad stops the crackdown on rebels. Assad refused to listen; therefore, it came as no surprise to many to see a

⁷⁹ Al-Matter, T., 2016. SAUDI ARABIA AND THE ARAB SPRING: FIVE YEARS OF INFLUENCE AND ACTION., pp.448–454

⁸⁰ Phillips, J., There is urgency pushing back against Iran's regional expansion | James Phillips. AW. Available at: <https://thearabweekly.com/there-urgency-pushing-back-against-irans-regional-expansion> [Accessed May 26, 2018].

shift in the Qatari policy, running out of patience with the Syrian regime.⁸¹

Qatar in July 2011 cut its relations with Assad by closing its embassy in Damascus. Qatari Emir Hamad was among the first to call on the international community to militarily intervene in Syria in order to put an end to the bloodshed of the Syrian people.⁸² Even the Qatari based media outlet Al Jazeera that had once paid less coverage to the Syrian protests started to launch anti-Assad propaganda immediately. In the meantime, the Qatari based Muslim brotherhood also released a fatwa or expert legal opinion, calling on protestors to stand up against the Syrian regime. Therefore, Qatar emerged as one of the driving forces behind the evolution of the Syrian crisis by pouring millions of dollars in helping the rebels in their fight against the regime.⁸³

Moreover, in regards to Turkey's stance towards the Syrian Crisis, Ankara more or less had similar stance like its Arab counterparts. Ankara believed that Assad could be negotiated with conditions and offers. Ankara, similarly, like Qatar had maintained good relations with Syria. Their relations had improved to the point that the leaders of both countries were spending holiday's together at a personal level in Turkey. Turkey, in the beginning, was ambitious as it had a dual strategy, the Turkish administration simultaneously supported the Syrian rebels while the same time it also advised the Syrian president by sending its envoy to Damascus in June 2011, urging Assad to fire his brother Maher known as the "thug in chief." Turkey believed that its influence would force Assad to stop the crackdown on the rebels. Assad, after meeting with the Turkish envoy, started to withdraw his forces and tanks from Hama.

However, the next day, Assad repositioned his troops, and he once again put his killing machine in action. Immediately after talks and meetings failed with Assad, ties were cut, and as a result, Erdogan threw his full support behind Syrian

⁸¹ Steinberg, G., 2014. Leading the Counter-Revolution Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring., p.6.

⁸² Ulrichsen, K.C., 2016. Internal and External security Dynamics of Qatari Policy toward the Syria Uprising. *La Política Exterior de Qatar*, p.69.

⁸³ Phillips, C., 2018. *The battle for Syria: international rivalry in the new middle east*, New Haven and: Yale University Press. Page-68-69

protestors. On 23 August 2011, with Ankara's blessings, the opposition SNC or Syrian National Council was established in Istanbul. Looking at the Syrian civil war from a regional dimension, Turkey had a significant role in the evolution of the Syrian crisis, and its frontier with Syria became a supply hub for rebels passing through the borders from Turkey to Syria.⁸⁴

While Iran is believed to be the staunchest ally of the Syrian regime, as the protests continued in Syria, according to Iran's expert Jubin Goodarzi(2013), Iran emerged as a driving force, and it faced Hobson choice it either had to support Bashar or threw its support behind the rebels.⁸⁵ Therefore when the situation deteriorated and when the Syrian regime lost a massive swath of its territory, Iran became worried because the loss of Syria as an ally would mean a significant blow for Tehran that would effectively cut its access to its regional interests and ambitions. As a result, Iran, for the sake of its axis with Syria and its regional interests, chose Bashar over the rebels. Therefore, the course of events in Syria started to reveal that the Iranian attitude toward Syria proved the most decisive one. The Iranian policy, which has not indifferent throughout the crisis, is carefully elaborated on, in Chapter Three.

2.3.3. International Dimensions

Indeed, Syria's geopolitics have given strategic importance to both Regional and International powers, and with no doubt, the United States, the European Union, Russia, and China are having significant stakes in it. Therefore, the Syrian crisis presented these countries with both opportunities and challenges. There are also two confrontational fronts on the international dimensions of the Syrian Crisis. Russia, China, and Iran are supportive of the Bashar al Assad regime on the one hand, while on the opposite side, The US and The European Union countries such as Germany, France, and the UK are supporting the rebels. Due to such stark differences among International players, mediation and peace talks in Geneva have

⁸⁴ Ibid Phillips, C., 2018. Page-70-75

⁸⁵ Goodarzi, J.M., 2013. Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment. *Middle Eastern Studies/Ortadoğu Etütleri*, 4(2). Page 49-51

repeatedly failed.⁸⁶

Overall, the Syrian war is played out mainly by the US and Russia. Both the USA and Russia have significantly contributed to the local actors by providing them financial and military equipment, which as a result, has kept local actors equipped to fight each other. Therefore, to unravel the puzzle, one must have first look at the Russian and US motives behind their involvement in Syria. Both countries have specific ambitions that will be expounded upon one by one in the following way.

In the case of Russia's Stance towards the Syrian Crisis, Moscow generally demands to be treated as an equal partner by the US, in the international community. Russia's involvement in Syria provided an opportunity to flex its muscles and show its strength and capacity as a major global player in resolving challenges.⁸⁷ Although various factors motivate Moscow's engagement in the Syrian civil war, Moscow looks at the Middle East from different aspects, namely: Domestic, and Economic.

First and foremost, to start with the first motive of Russia, as Putin was making his comeback to the power, Moscow in December 2011, was hit by widespread of protests which according to the political analysts strengthened Russia's position to engage in Middle East affairs particularly in Syria. According to Christopher Phillips (2016), the popular unrest in Moscow and elsewhere in Russia put the Kremlin in fear that these protestors may get inspired by what was happening in the Middle East. Meanwhile, Russia also feared Islamist terrorism, almost 14% of the Russian population are Muslims, and Kremlin in the past had suffered several attacks from Islamist terrorists. Kremlin, therefore, feared spreading of ISIS violent interpretation of Islam both among the Muslims of North Caucasia and Central Asia. Hence, to avoid such threats, Russia was determined to throw its support behind the regime of Bashar al Assad.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Phillips, C., 2018. *The battle for Syria: international rivalry in the new middle east*, New Haven and: Yale University Press. Page-68

⁸⁷ Talukdar, I., 2016. Russia's Strategic Interest in Syria. *Indian Council of World Affairs*, pp.1-11

⁸⁸ Phillips, C., 2018. *The battle for Syria: international rivalry in the new middle east*, New Haven and: Yale University Press. Page-47-50

Lastly, from an Economic point of view, Russia has both Military and Energy-related aspirations in the region. According to Indrani Talukdar (2016), who claims that right after the fall of the Libyan leader Muammar Gadhafi, Russia lost almost \$ 4 Billion. Therefore, for Russia, to avoid the repetition of similar scenarios, it was essential to aid the Syrian regime. Russia has a significant market both in the Energy and Military equipment sectors. It maintains a foothold in the naval bases of Tartus and Khamim located in Syria. Although Syria is not a major buyer of Russian equipment, its location is what gives Syria an essential place in Russia's Policy. Russian naval bases are believed to have helped Moscow in selling its military hardware and equipment. Sales of Russian military equipment, in 2015 hit a record of \$14.5 billion.⁸⁹

When looking at all these factors elaborated above, one can say that Moscow, for the sake of its own interests, threw its full support behind the Syrian regime. Initially, Moscow indirectly supported the Syrian regime through diplomatic means; however, as soon as the situation deteriorated in Syria, Moscow was quick in to assume a more direct role in the crisis.

Meanwhile, Russia's international rival, The United States, to some extent along with some other international players, was locked in a bandwidth in which Washington could not adopt a confrontational policy towards Bashar al Assad regime. Initially, the United States believed that Assad could be negotiated with, and he could be encouraged to introduce reforms. According to the Washington Post (2011), Clinton, in an interview with CBS on March 27-2011 said: "There is a different leader in Syria now. Many of the members of Congress of both parties who have gone to Syria in recent months have said they believe he is a reformer."⁹⁰

However, contrary to the US expectation, Bashar al Assad continued cracking down harshly on the peaceful protestors. Henceforward, the US retaliated

⁸⁹ Talukda, I., 2016. Russia's Strategic Interest in Syria., pp.1–11

⁹⁰ Kessler, G., 2011. Hillary Clinton's incredible statement on Syria. *The Washington Post*. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/hillary-clintons-uncredible-statement-on-syria/2011/04/01/AFWPEYac_blog.html?noredirect=on [Accessed July 18, 2018].

by punishing the Syrian regime with Economic Sanctions. On 29th April 2011, President Obama signed an official order designed to impose sanctions on President Bashar al Assad and his brother Maher al Assad and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards who had been advising the Syrian regime since the onset of the crisis.

Moreover, the US further lost its patience when pro-Assad gangs attacked the US Embassy in Damascus in August 2011. In the same year, the US president called on Bashar al Assad to step aside and must lead a peaceful transition to the Syrian people. “The future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way. His calls for dialogue and reform have rung hollow while he is imprisoning, torturing and slaughtering his own people. We have consistently said that President Assad must lead a democratic transition or get out of the way.”⁹¹

Although, militarily, the US continued keeping a low profile on the ground by leading from behind strategy, which was a total reversal of the Bush policy toward the Middle East. The Obama administration, since succeeding, insisted on leading from behind. The US on the ground only supported numbers of rebels groups within Syria such as PYD (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat in Kurdish; Kurdish Democratic Union Party) and some FSA rebels to that extent.⁹² Therefore, in this sense, it could be said that the initial US policy in Syria was carried out by its regional and international rivals, notably Russia and Iran. Alternatively, in other words, the US low profile policy was outplayed by the staunchest supporters of the Syrian regime, Russia, and Iran. Both these countries could easily manipulate the situation in Syria, and as a result of their support for the Syrian regime, they further narrowed the chances of a peaceful transition of the Syrian regime to a more democratic one.

In addition to Russia and the US role in the Evolution of the Syrian Crisis,

⁹¹ Statement by President Obama on the Situation in Syria. *National Archives and Records Administration*. Available at: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/08/18/statement-president-obama-situation-syria> [Accessed June 19, 2018].

⁹² EKŞİ, M., 2017. The Syrian Crisis as a Proxy War and the Return of the Realist Great Power Politics., pp.111–115.

China's role as an international must not be ignored, internationally the United States and Russia are not the only nations actively jostling in the Syrian crisis. In fact, another prominent nation playing a part is China as they too are following the conflict closely in view of their own interests. Both Beijing and Moscow have three times exercised their veto power in the UN Security Council to prevent the US proposals aimed to punish the Bashar al-Assad regime being accepted.⁹³

China has consistently sided with Russia in its proposed resolutions in the UN Security Council that protect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Syrian government, and since 2011, Beijing has teamed up with Moscow to veto four western-launched resolutions. Before this, Beijing had only vetoed ten times since 1971, so we can see that China's increased use of veto during the Syrian crisis, shows a more active role in influencing the Middle East in pursuit of its national interest.

Beijing is concerned that the ongoing Syrian conflict could inspire and globalize domestic terrorists. The issue between the Chinese government and the persecution of its Muslim, Uyghur minority in the north-western Xinjiang province has led several retaliatory terrorist attacks in China and on Chinese citizens and interests overseas. Thousands of Chinese nationals, mainly Uyghurs, are thought to have joined Jabhat Fath al-Sham (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra) in Syria and hundreds with the so-called Islamic State. China is not a member of the international coalition against terrorist groups in Syria, but Beijing is collaborating with Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and other Middle Eastern governments on counterterrorism initiatives.⁹⁴

Watching the American military drain resources during the last decade of military expeditions in Iraq and Afghanistan, Beijing has wisely opted for minimum military engagement and is currently the only member of the UN Security Council

⁹³ Heidarpour, M., 2015. Syria Crisis and a New Political Agenda for China: Changes or Continuity? *Middle East Political Review*, pp.24–25.

⁹⁴ Patey, L. & Malmvig, H., 2016. Geopolitics and Non-Western Intervention in Syria: China and Israel. Available at: <http://www.css.ethz.ch/en/services/digital-library/articles/article.html/98209a17-92ed-4218-a4a1-fef31d74800b/pdf> [Accessed May 26, 2018].

with no direct military activity in Syria. But with that said, China certainly has an indirect military influence on the Syrian conflict through the back door as one of Syria's leading arms providers before the crisis broke out in 2011 and since then has leveraged the position of the Syrian army through political support on the UN Security Council.⁹⁵

2.4. Concluding Remarks

Overall, Iran's response to the upheavals in the region was, to a considerable degree, caught between its own interests and the interests of the region. Tehran holds seemingly contradictory stances toward North Africa and the Gulf and has a different position to that of its stance on uprisings in the Levant. Tehran sees the uprisings in North Africa and the Gulf as Islamic revolutions but in Syria, has completely disassociated itself from the rebellion and has designated it as a conspiracy of the West and Israel. Therefore, it is no surprise that many political commentators have accused Iran of double standards in relation to its inconsistent policies. It is widely regarded that Tehran's foreign policy has more than a pinch of hypocrisy and that it is opportunistic in its response to the Arab spring by supporting the protests of North Africa and the Gulf, while at the same time denouncing the peaceful demonstrations of Syrians who in turn received the most brutal governmental retaliation.

Henceforward, Syria hurtled into a bloody civil war that has made the country a chaotic battleground for both regional and international proxies. The problem of the crisis in Syria escalated beyond that of an individual state and became a regional proxy war and then a proxy war between major global powers. In this way, the dynamics of the Syria crisis escalated and diversified. The civil war dynamics within the country included the dynamics of a sectarian clash and affected the geopolitical rivalry between regional and international powers that were involved in the civil war as a proxy.

⁹⁵ Ibid

Chapter III

IRAN'S POLICY DURING THE SYRIAN WAR 2011-2017

Although the Arab spring presented the Islamic Republic of Iran with new opportunities, in the case of Syria, Tehran's policy was caught off-guard. Regarding Iran's support for the Syrian regime, Iran has acted contrary to its foreign policy, by fighting the oppressed and helping the oppressors in contrast to its stance toward the other Arab revolutions. It accused the west and Israel of masterminding the unrest and denouncing the protestors as thugs. The Islamic Republic of Iran has played a crucial role in the Syrian crisis and along with Russia and China, it has thrown its support behind the Syrian president in his fight against the rebels. Syria plays a vital role in Iran's strategic ties in the Mediterranean and the Near East, and unlike the rest of the Arab world, Iran has pursued a different view based on the benefits of the developments in Syria. It is unacceptable for Tehran to lose one of its most essential allies in the heart of the Middle East. Iran's stakes in Syria are significant, and since the beginning of the crisis in Syria, the Islamic Republic of Iran has vigorously pursued a supportive policy toward the regime of President Bashar al Assad. Bearing this in mind, this chapter aims to offer an account of the initial Iranian policy towards the Syrian war.

3. INITIAL IRANIAN POLICY TOWARDS THE SYRIAN WAR

The Iranian narrative of Islamic awakening and the Islamic revolution was challenged when the waves of the Arab Spring reached Syria. In the beginning, people started to rally against the regime, demanding the removal of President Bashar al Assad and his family. However, these anti-regime protests in Syria clashed with Iranian interests in the region. The Iranian officials continued to pay full attention to developments taking place in the region, while they simultaneously ignored talking about them publicly. Throughout the initial years, as it can be clearly seen from the speeches of the supreme leader in which not a single mention

of Syria was made, Iran was reluctant in making any statements about the Syrian crisis.⁹⁶

Therefore, it is believed that the Iranian narrative of Islamic awakening aimed at projecting itself as the champion of the oppressed, showed signs of flaws and double standards. Right after the Syrian crisis, political pundits thought that the Islamic Republic of Iran would acknowledge the Syrian crisis as a true and successful Islamic awakening. However, because of the Iranian's alliance with Syria, no such thing happened, and as soon as the people started to protest against the regime, the Iranian leadership faced a major dilemma, failing to label the Syrian uprising as an Islamic uprising like those that took place elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa. In the case of Syria, Tehran had two peculiar choices either it had to put its support behind the regime or throw its weight behind the rebels, which was not a preferable option.⁹⁷

3.1. Phase I: President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2011-2013)

Iranian policy towards the Syrian war under the tenure of president Ahmadinejad was marked with silence. Likewise, the supreme leader, president Ahmadinejad opted silence, ignoring the Syrian crisis because it did not fit into the Iranian interpretation of the Islamic awakening narrative. Because of the developments taking place in Syria, Tehran silence over the Syrian crisis did not last long and it therefore gradually redefined its position by actively supporting the Syrian regime with political, financial, and military assistance. Tehran, in the first, believed that assisting Bashar al Assad would somehow resolve the crisis in a short time.

However, contrary to Iranian expectations, the Syrian crisis did not only continue but, in the meantime, they turned into further chaos, putting of President Ahmadinejad administration in an uncomfortable position. According to Jubin Goodarzi (2013), ever since the Syrian crisis, the anxiety of Tehran became so

⁹⁶ Ryel, N. A. B. (2017). *The axis of resistance: Iranian foreign policy and Syria* (Master's thesis, Norwegian University of Life Sciences, As), pp.44–45

⁹⁷ *ibid*

evident, forcing Iranian diplomats to rethink their discourse on Syria. As a result, Tehran softened its policy and started to approach rebels groups for negotiations and discussions.⁹⁸ Tehran's rapprochement with the rebels simultaneously came along in the same line with the statements of the Iranian officials condemning the killings of the Syrian people by the regime forces. To recall an example for the statement made above, President Ahmadinejad declared that he is against all killing taking place in Syria and he also stated that he will act wisely in the case of Syria and will encourage the Syrian president to make fundamental reforms. Concerning the Iranian rapprochements with the rebels fictions, Mohammed Farouk Tayfour the deputy General of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in an interview with al Hayat said that through his Turkish connections, Iranian businessmen from Istanbul approached him in order to exchange their views about the Syrian conflict. To directly quote him, he said that: "[The Iranian businessmen] were willing to negotiate with [the idea of granting us] the whole government on the condition that Bashar al-Assad remains, president."⁹⁹ However, Assad remaining in the office as president was not at any mean acceptable for the rebels as they had already declared position that they could only talk with the Iranians if Assad steps down. However, due to the uncompromising stance of the rebels and Iranian officials, no deal could emerge.

Therefore, as soon as the rapprochement with the Syrian rebels failed, Tehran came to view the Syrian crisis through a zero-sum game, where Iranian officials placed their narrative of the Syrian crisis on terms such as "Sedition" and "The Conspiracy of the West and Zionists." These remarks of Tehran came along in the same line with the speeches of the Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. Both the Supreme Leader and President Ahmadinejad called the crisis in Syria a seditious plan of Zionists and Western aimed at breaking the "Axis of

⁹⁸ Goodarzi, J., 2013. *Iran and Syria at the Crossroads: The Fall of the Tehran-Damascus Axis?* Middle East Program, Wilson Center.pp.2-3

⁹⁹ al-Amine, H., 2018. Leader of Syrian Muslim Brotherhood Discloses Secret Offer from Iran. Available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2012/01/tayfour-to-al-hayat-iran-offered.html#ixzz5j2KJaoh8> [Accessed May 26, 2018].

Resistance” between Iran and Syria. President Ahmadinejad stated that Iran would oppose any interference in the domestic affairs of Syria, and he also accused Israel and the West taking advantage of the situation in Syria.¹⁰⁰

Moreover, as the turmoil in Syrian entered into a new phase of proxy warfare, consequently Tehran during the years of 2011 and 2012 intensified its financial and military support to the Syrian regime. On the one hand, regional Player such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, including other Muslim countries decided to throw their support behind the rebels, while on the other hand, Iran and Hezbollah put their support behind the Syrian regime. Gulf countries and Turkey continued providing rebels with material and financial assistance and vice versa Iran along with Russia continued to ship arms to the Syrian regime while at the same time Moscow and China diplomatically continued their efforts at blocking any resolution laying groundwork for a foreign military intervention in Syria.

3.2. Phase II: President Hassan Rouhani (2013-2017)

When in 2013, the reformist president Hassan Rouhani took power hopes were revived due to his reformists’, and pragmatic stance. It was expected that the new pragmatic president Hassan Rouhani would pursue a different course of policy toward the Syrian civil war. Although Rouhani did not officially disclose his position toward Syria, however, in July 2013 it was reported by some media outlets and Iranian officials that President Rouhani was working on a plan to encourage President Assad and the Syrian opposition to sit for peace talks. Moreover, some close associates of Rouhani also stated that the Iranian president was evaluating the option of replacing Bashar al Assad with a “Syrian Karzai” in the form of a Sunni Arab who would be acceptable to all parties including the regional and trans-regional players.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Ryel, N. A. B. (2017). *The axis of resistance: Iranian foreign policy and Syria* (Master's thesis, Norwegian University of Life Sciences, As).

¹⁰¹ Akbarzadeh, S. and Conduit, D. eds., 2016. *Iran in the World: President Rouhani's Foreign Policy*. Springer.

Nonetheless, Rouhani's efforts were ineffective because, at the time when Rouhani took power, Iran was heavily suffering from economic blowbacks and sanctions. According to Shahram Akbarzadeh & Dara Conduit (2016), Rouhani's policy toward Syria was caught off-guard at the time of sanctions. Iran was isolated due to the sanctions imposed by the international community and therefore President Hassan Rouhani, for the sake of his interests and as a way to move forward, adopted a more calm and diplomatic approach toward the war in Syria.¹⁰²

Thereafter, Iran adopted a two-spate policy at the same time, Tehran, on the one hand, continued assisting the Syrian military by keeping its boots on the ground in coordination with its allies, while on the other hand, Tehran increased its diplomatic efforts in solving the Syrian Crisis. Henceforward, Rouhani's administration came up with its own four-point peace plan which included: "an immediate ceasefire; constitutional reforms to safeguard Syrian minorities; free and internationally supervised elections; and the formation of a national unity government based on new constitutional institutions."¹⁰³ However, all these attempts were futile and fell by the wayside.

In the meantime, as the new developments were taking place in 2014, Iran needed to adopt a new narrative in its foreign policy discourse towards Syria. The meteoric rise of ISIS brought sea changes in the foreign policy discourse of regional and international actors as well as in the Iranian discourse of its policy toward Syria. As the conflict escalated and when ISIS launched large scale attacks on Baghdad and Damascus reaching almost a few kilometers from the Iraqi capital. This incident had a seismic impact in Iran with Iran able to use it to ignite both Shia and nationalist sentiment, drumming up public support in Syria against the Takfiri and Daesh groups. It can be seen that while the military operations of Iran in Syria had unifying effects at home, this may be well have been focused on to deliberately capture the attention of the Iranian public. Iran, in its new discourse, saw the protection of Shiite sites as an important holy duty. By 2015 the number of Iranian

¹⁰² Ibid

¹⁰³ Ansari, A. & Tabrizi, A.B., 2016. Understanding Iran's Role in the Syrian Conflict., pp.3–9

deaths in Syria exceeded one thousand, and the regime barely gave this fact any airtime in the media, as a way to avoid angering the masses, then the rise of Takfiri groups and their attacks in Iran began to stimulate Iran's religious rhetoric against their enemies.¹⁰⁴

Meanwhile, Iran officially sanctified its efforts as fighting terrorism in Syria while viewing this all through the esoteric lenses of its own religious transcendent end-game narrative. The sectarian justification has been instrumental in recruiting fighters from other countries, on top of urging its own citizens to volunteer to defend the holy Shiite shrines with its international network; Iran has recruited Shiites from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and neighboring Iraq.

3.3. Dimensions of Iranian Strategy towards Syria

Iran's position in Syria is quite clear. Iran will do its best to keep its ally in power; however, for the sake of its precautions, Tehran has taken one step further by deploying Shiite and Alawite proxies to Syria. Therefore, looking at the unfolding of events, a very pragmatic and strategic game can be seen being played, between these two allied regimes. It affirms that the two nations have a mutually beneficial, opportunistic relationship, which necessitates jumping to the aid of each other; hence, Iran's unwavering propping up of the Syrian regime throughout the current crisis.

Therefore, Tehran, for the sake of its ally, has adopted a multifaceted strategy which includes extensive, expensive, and integrated efforts. Initially Tehran supported the Syrian regime financially right after the breakout of the Civil War, and gradually it extended its military assistance first in the form of Limited Advisory Missions (2011-2012), Training, Advice and Assist Missions (September 2012- 2015) and in the later stages when the situation further escalated Tehran took more active role in directly engaging in the Syrian crisis coinciding with

¹⁰⁴ Al-Smadi, F., 2017. *Iran and the Arab Revolutions: Narratives Establishing Iran's Monopolism*. Al Jazeera Centre for Studies. Available at: <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2017/03/iran-arab-revolutions-narratives-establishing-irans-monopolism-170318050125225.html> [Accessed May 26, 2018].

(September 2015- January 2017). Tehran's direct intervention in Syria, as a result, has paid off, and Assad seems to be winning enormous gains against the rebels. As of April 2018, the Assad regime had regained control of most of its territory that once had been in the hands of the opposition. All this would have never been possible without direct intervention and assistance from Iran.

3.3.1. Financial Assistance

Firstly, after the 2011 protests, the Syrian economy sustained huge losses and saw a complete decline. Every single sector of the Syrian economy was affected even interrupting the whole industry. As the Syrian crisis turned violent, the international community was quick in imposing sanctions on the Syrian regime. The European Union, which had once been the biggest buyer of Syrian crude oil, stopped doing business with Syria. Regime-affiliated banks and petroleum companies were blacklisted and banned from interacting with the outside business world.¹⁰⁵

However, when the situation escalated in 2013, Syria lost its major economic powerhouses of Damascus and Aleppo. Damascus and Aleppo accounted for almost 50 percent of Syria's manufacturing sector. The expansion of the violence led to a collapse of industry in both cities with most companies either being looted or destroyed, and as a consequence, most of the Middle-Class industrialists were either forced to migrate, or they took their capital with them to the neighboring countries, notably to The Republic of Turkey.

Moreover, the regime also lost possession of the oil refinery and grain sources to the opposition forces. Syria was in the chaos of war, and financially, it had sustained enormous injuries. Although there is no official report available about the decline in the Syrian economy, it is concluded that the Syrian economy between the years of 2011-2013 nosedived and unemployment reached 50 percent and half of the population remained in severe poverty. As a result, it became the second

¹⁰⁵ Gobat, J. & Kostial, K., 2016. Syria's Conflict Economy., pp.13.

smallest economy in the Arab world with a nominal GDP of 30 billion dollars after Bahrain with 28\$ billion.¹⁰⁶

Despite all these blowbacks and losses, the Syrian economy stood firm, but the question arises here, how could the Syrian economy possibly withstand all the sanctions and internal conflict? The answer to the question lies in Iran's financial support to the Assad regime. Tehran's financial grants of billions of dollars saved Bashar al Assad regime from complete economic collapse.

According to Bloomberg citing the United Nations Representative for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, "Iran spends roughly between \$6 billion to \$35 billion annually on the administration of Bashar al-Assad."¹⁰⁷ Although no accurate reports are available, according to most of the scholars, Iranian spending in Syria reached between \$6 to \$35 billion per year, including all the civil and non-civil aides.¹⁰⁸

Financially Tehran has been one of the main backers of the Syrian regime. Although in the past both countries have never done business together on a large scale, however, with the start of the war, business relations increased, and Tehran became one of the biggest trade partners of Syria even interestingly both signing a free trade agreement to improve bilateral trade from \$700 million to \$24 billion. In July 2011, it was reported that Iran was considering financial assistance approved by Khamenei with the amount of \$5.2 billion in the form of cash and oil supplies to the Syrian regime. This package included three months of loans worth \$1.5 billion that were granted to the Syrian regime immediately. The package also comprised a provision of 290,000 barrels of oil per day to the Syrian regime.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Khan, M. & Milbert, S., 2014. Syria's Economic Glory Days are Gone. *Atlantic Council*. Available at: <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/syria-s-economic-glory-days-are-gone> [Accessed March 2, 2018].

¹⁰⁷ Lake, E., 2015. *Bloomberg.com*. Available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2015-06-09/iran-spends-billions-to-prop-up-assad> [Accessed August 19, 2018].

¹⁰⁸ Rifai, F.al-, 2018. Iran spending in Syria surpasses domestic spending: report. *Home Page*. Available at: <https://en.zamanalwsl.net/news/PrinterFriendlyVersion/34843> [Accessed August 12, 2018].

¹⁰⁹ Price, B., 2013. Syria: A Wicked Problem for All. *New York Times.*, 6(8), pp.11–12.

Again, in January 2013, during a visit by the Syrian Prime Minister Wael al-Halki, Tehran agreed to deposit \$500 million into Syria's central bank to help Assad to prop up his local currency. Moreover, in July both countries inked a deal worth of \$4.6 billion of credits in line assistance to the Syrian regime. The first batch of these credits with the worth of \$1billion was intended to fund imports of the Syrian government and the second batch with an additional sum of \$3.6 billion in line credits was dedicated for the purchase of petroleum and oil products.¹¹⁰

Furthermore, in an interview in June 2013 with The Financial Times, the Syrian deputy minister for oil said that Iran would continue granting monthly oil aids worth of \$500m and would extend credit lines to the Syrian regime.⁵ Syria in December 2013 issued tenders of food with 150,000 tons of sugar, 50,000 tons of rice, 25,000 tons of flour and a wide range of other food using the Iranian credit line. According to Syria's General Foreign Trade Organization (GFTO), in most of these tenders, the payment would come from the Iranian credit and would be paid through the Commercial Bank of Syria and the Export Development Bank of Iran.¹¹¹

Aside from food aid, Iran also provided the Syrian regime with cheap oil, mainly for military purposes. When in 2013 the international community, primarily the EU stopped buying crude oil from the Syrian regime, Tehran stepped up and helped its ally by taking the Syrian crude oil, disguise its origin and sell it on the international market. However, when Syria lost control of the entirety of its oil wells, Tehran helped the Syrian regime with cheap oil from Iraq in order to overcome the oil shortages. As of 2103, the Reuters Agency revealed that Tehran

¹¹⁰ Al-Khalidi, S., 2013. Iran grants Syria \$3.6 billion credit to buy oil products. *Reuters*. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-iran/iran-grants-syria-3-6-billion-credit-to-buy-oil-products-idUSBRE96U0XN20130731> [Accessed February 2, 2018].

¹¹¹ UPDATE 1-Syria issues second food tender using Iranian credit.(2013) *Reuters*. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/syria-flour/update-1-syria-issues-second-food-tender-using-iranian-credit-idUSL6N0K30WC20131224> [Accessed March 16, 2018].

had transported millions of barrels of Iraqi cheap crude oil as part of an under the radar deal through Lebanese and Egyptian trading companies.¹¹²

Overall, it is difficult to gauge the exact amount of money that Iran has been spending in Syria because Iranian financial assistance includes a variety of economic aid such as direct cash, credits in line, subsidized oil, and military grants. However, most of the reports so far regarding Iranian spending in Syria suggest that Iran has been spending roughly between \$6 billion and \$16 billion in Syria.

3.3.2. Limited Advisory Mission (2011-2012)

Among Tehran second batch of aid to the Syrian regime includes military deployment in the form of a limited advisory role. As the situation in Syria went beyond the control of Bashar Al Assad, the Iranian regime saw it as their responsibility to help their ally by dispatching the Law Enforcement personnel including the Islamic Revolution Guards Force both from the IRGC-GF, IRGC-QF forces on a Limited Advisory Mission. Given their successful record, the IRGC was successful in aiding the Syrian regime in repressing the protests throughout Syria.

As in the early days, when the regime sought to suppress the protesters, the need for Iranian intelligence support became a must. The Iranian Intelligence organizations were violently effective in dispersing the protestors by using the same tactics which they had once used in Iran against the “Green Movement” in 2009. Therefore, several Iranian intelligence entities such as the Intelligence Protection Organization of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Law Enforcement Forces, the ministry of intelligence security and Iranian electronic industries played an essential role in providing Assad with considerable intelligence information. The aids of Iranian intelligence to the Syrian regime included “electronic surveillance systems, technology designed to disrupt efforts by protesters and Iranian-made

¹¹² Payne, J., 2013. Exclusive: Assad's secret oil lifeline: Iraqi crude from Egypt. *Reuters*. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-oil/exclusive-assads-secret-oil-lifeline-iraqi-crude-from-egypt-idUSBRE9BM0RI20131223> [Accessed March 26, 2018].

drones for overhead surveillance,”¹¹³ said a US official in an interview with Reuters. Iranian intelligence engagement in Syria became evident when in April 2011, the head of the Law Enforcement Forces Ahmad Reza Radan, traveled to Syria to meet the Syrian intelligence General Intelligence Directorate (GID). He apparently provided “expertise to aid in the Syrian government in its crackdown on the Syrian people.”¹¹⁴

In addition to the deployment of intelligence personnel, Tehran also provided Syria with its elite brigades of IRGC-GF and IRGC-QF. However, among the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Forces, the IRGC-QF played a more critical role in helping Assad’s grip on to the power. IRGC-QF, as an external arm of the Iranian regime, is mainly responsible for Tehran’s external and clandestine operation abroad. Therefore, it was no surprise to see Qasim Suleimani taking the Iranian policy towards Syria in his hand. The prominent General joined the IRGC forces during the Iran-Iraq war as an ordinary soldier, but as soon as the war ended, he was promoted to the rank of IRGC extraterritorial Quds forces commander. Despite his initial cooperation with the US during the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, Suleimani would make his name as a crucial planner of the attacks against US forces by sponsoring Shiite-Sunni proxies in their fight against the Americans in Afghanistan and Iraq.¹¹⁵

Therefore, he was tasked to apply his skills in Syria in order to help Bashar al Assad hold onto the power. Although at first Iran continuously rejected IRGC presence in Syria however, the extent of Quds forces involvement in Syria became evident when in February 2013, an Iranian Brigadier General Hassan

¹¹³ Warrick, J., 2011. Iran reportedly aiding Syrian crackdown. *The Washington Post*. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/iran-reportedly-aiding-syrian-crackdown/2011/05/27/AGUJe0CH_story.html?utm_term=.94c691a1d096 [Accessed March 19, 2018].

¹¹⁴ Hosenball, M., 2012. Iran helping Assad to put down protests: officials. *Reuters*. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-syria-crackdown/iran-helping-assad-to-put-down-protests-officials-idUSBRE82M18220120323> [Accessed March 20, 2018].

¹¹⁵ Phillips, C., 2018. *The battle for Syria: international rivalry in the new Middle East*, New Haven: Yale University Press, pp.160

Shatari was killed on his way to Beirut from Syria. Hassan Shatari was one of a high ranking IRGC official who was operating secretly in Syria particularly in Aleppo. Therefore, the death of Shatari showed the Quds forces high-level of involvement in Syria.¹¹⁶

Moreover, likewise, its sister wing the IRGC Ground forces which are mainly responsible for the domestic security of Iran were also dispatched to Syria alongside the IRGC-QF forces. Most of the cadets from the IRGC ground forces hail from the border provinces of Iran, and they have significant experiences in counterinsurgencies that were an excellent remedy for the Assad regime. Therefore, as the IRGC-GF were critical in Syria, and they activated from the operation rooms far from the front lines by advising the Assad military personnel with their counterinsurgency and warfare techniques.¹¹⁷

3.3.3. TAA (Train, Advice, and Assist Mission September 2012-2015)

In the finishing days of 2012, when Assad's fortune at the battleground declined, Tehran adopted a TAA strategy by increasing numbers of its IRGC military personnel to train, advice and assist various proxy groups and regime forces. Iran's support of these groups lies with the formula of Train, Advice, and Assist (TAA Strategy). The strategy is primarily aimed at providing an external force with the training, advising, and assisting during military operations. According to Nicholas Hargreaves (2018) for the past few decades, the TAA strategy has become the seal mark of asymmetrical or proxy war. It is an excellent choice of engagement for countries who want to pursue a high-stake engagement in the war without any direct military interference. It is also cost-effective in reducing the blood spill and financial expenses.¹¹⁸

Therefore, at the time, the TAA strategy perfectly fit the Iranian strategy for supporting Bashar al Assad in Syria. As of 2012 and 2014, Tehran had shifted to

¹¹⁶ Fulton, W., Holliday, J. and Wyer, S., 2013. *Iranian strategy in Syria*. AEI's Critical Threats Project., pp.15-16.

¹¹⁷ Ibid Page.12-13

¹¹⁸ Heald, N.H., 2018. Proving Ground: Iran's Operational Strategy in Syria. *Small Wars Journal*.

TAA strategy by deploying various Shiite groups from across the world. Iran has so far trained, assisted, and advised multiple proxy groups through its highly trained IRGC forces. The deployment of these Shiite militia and proxy groups stem from the protection of the Shiite shrines in Damascus. However, contrary to their narrative of protecting the Shiite sites, these Shiite paramilitaries and proxies have instead adopted an active role in the frontlines. These Proxies that are going to be elaborated in the following way are believed to be part of Iran's multifaceted strategy for rescuing Bashar al Assad regime in Syria. They are basically divided into two major categories, in the first categories are the highly combat professional militias such as Hezbollah and the Iraqi Shiites while in the second category other Shiites such as the Afghani Fatimyon, Pakistani Zynabyoon and Shiites from Yemen are placed. These Shiite fighters from both factions have played a vital role in combat operations and are mostly deployed in the North from Hama to Idlib and in the South from Derra to Damascus.

Firstly, Lebanese Hezbollah, as one of the leading groups from the first category, led by Hassan Nasrallah, has one of the biggest deployments of fighters on a non-state level in Syria. Hezbollah initially burst onto the scene in late 2012 under the guise of protecting the Shiite holy sites and shrines. After that, like the IRCG forces, Hezbollah started to aid Assad with advisory roles. However, when in late 2012, Assad's luck in the war started to wane, the Lebanese Hezbollah in collaboration with the IRCG forces engaged in a more active role. Since then, LH has provided Bashar al Assad with an increasing level of assistance, it has also ensured to keep up the supply of Iranian arms shipments to Syria. LH forces alongside the IRCG forces have trained and assisted regime forces for the sake of their interests.

Hezbollah forces are vital to the durability of the Syrian regime, and they are better suited to the war in Syria for several reasons; their native Arabic language and infantry experience makes them better suited to the Syrian community than the Persians fighting in Syria. Meanwhile, they are also a perfect supplement for the Syrian army who lack asymmetrical techniques. Hezbollah's engagement in Syria

includes counter sniper operations, joint clearing operation, route clearing, and direct military engagement on the frontline.¹¹⁹ As of their high-level warfare capabilities, Hizbollah has effectively trained, advised, and assisted pro-regime forces mostly the Shiites proxies both in Syria and Iraq. Some of these proxies trained by the Hizbollah are Quwat al Ridha, Al-Ghaliboun, Liwa al-Imam al-Baqir (or Baqir Brigade), who operate in different parts of Syria.¹²⁰

Moreover, Hezbollah expanded its combats engagement in mid-February 2013, when Hezbollah along with the Syrian regime and pro-regime militia launched a ground offensive against the rebels on Al-Qusayr. Al-Qusayr is primary a Sunni populated town of Homs located on the Lebanese border. The town has had strategic importance, and because of its location, it connects Damascus with the coastal provinces as well as to the Bekaa valley. The rebel's seizure of the town not only threatened major strategic routes, but it also targeted Assad's main lines of communication with the other coastal towns. The city's strategic location in the vicinity of the Lebanese border turned into a major smuggling point of weapons for rebels. Therefore, in order to cut the primary lifeline of the rebels, Hezbollah in collaboration with the Syrian regime launched a large-scale offensive aimed at taking back the control of the town from the hands of the rebels.¹²¹

Despite the fact LH forces are mainly deployed on the border areas between Syria and Lebanon however, Western officials suggest that Hezbollah has also deployed some of its forces deep into the other parts of Syria, such as Homs and Damascus and the governorate of Deir al-Zour in the Middle Euphrates River Valley. Though there is no precise data available about Hezbollah losses in Syria, it is believed that Hezbollah has as many as 7000 to 10000 fighters in Syria.¹²²

¹¹⁹ Ibid check Fulton, W., Holliday, J. and Wyer, S., 2013. pp.15-16.

¹²⁰ Smyth, P., 2018. Lebanese Hezbollah's Islamic Resistance in Syria. *Chemical Weapons in the Middle East - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*.

¹²¹ Sullivan, M., 2014. hezbollah in syria., pp.15-24.

¹²² Jones, S.G. & Markusen, M.B., 2018. The Escalating Conflict with Hezbollah in Syria. *The New Southbound Policy | Center for Strategic and International Studies*.

Like Iran, Hezbollah too despite its high losses, views the Syrian war being as conspiracy plan of the West and Israel against the Axis of Resistance. Therefore, Lebanese Hezbollah does not have any intention of leaving Syria until it achieves victory, as it was noted in the remarks of Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah that, "We will continue this battle until the end, and we are proud of our martyrs in Syria and whoever bargains on our tiredness will lose."¹²³ In another interview with the Fars news agency in 2015, The Hezbollah executive committee head, Nabil Qawooq was quoted as saying, "We will finish the war in Syria. We insist on defeating the terrorists and gaining victory against the Takfiri plots in Syria in a move to support Lebanon because if Syria turns into a center or passage for ISIL and other terrorist groups, they will not show mercy to Lebanon either."¹²⁴

In addition to Lebanese Hezbollah, Tehran has also recruited Iraqi Shiite militias in the Syrian frontlines. Iraqi Shiite fighters Like Hezbollah are believed to have significantly helped the Syrian regime in their fight against the rebels. The Iraqi Shiite paramilitaries also have several advantages over the non-Arabic speaking Shiite proxies, they are native speakers of Arabic, and meanwhile, their asymmetrical experiences have helped the Syrian army in their fight against opposition forces.¹²⁵

Moreover, most of these Iraqi Shiite proxies are deployed in the South and North of Syria, particularly in Derra and Aleppo close to the Iraqi border. According to the New York Times, the Iraqi Shiite proxies emerged as the most potent combat partner of IRCG-QF in the Syrian unrest. They, together with Hezbollah, trained, and assisted other Shiite proxies from across the world, such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen.

¹²³ PressTV-'Hezbollah to stay in Syria until final victory'. Available at: <https://www.presstv.com/Detail/2016/10/23/490353/Lebanon-Hezbollah-Nasrallah-fighters-Syria-win-Takfiri-militant-groups> [Accessed June 23, 2018].

¹²⁴ Farsnews. Available at: <http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13940817001246> [Accessed May 8, 2018].

¹²⁵ Peck, M., 2016. Doubling Down on Damascus Iran's Military Surge to Save the Assad Regime., pp.10–11.

Alongside major Shiite militias, Tehran IRCG forces have also conscripted hundreds of Shiite fighters from Yemen, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. These groups of the Iranian proxies are lay in the second category of the Iranian proxies. Contrary to the fighters from the first category, these Shiites proxies lack major warfare techniques they, therefore, undergo two stages of training in Syria. First, they receive military training from the IRCG, LH, and the Iraqi proxies then in the second stage, they are put into action for a short period of time in the frontlines. Upon finishing both stages, they are sent back to their home countries for special purposes. These groups of proxies include Shiites particularly from Afghanistan (The Fatimoon Brigade), Pakistan (The Pakistani Zeinabiyoun Brigade) and the Houthi militia.¹²⁶

Among the second category of the Shiite militias, The Fatimoon brigade is believed to be the second largest in number after the Lebanese Hezbollah. The Afghani contingents fighting in Syria are significant in Iran's multifaceted policy of saving Bashar al Assad. The brigade pulls most of its members from the undocumented Afghan refugees of the Hazara Shiite community in Iran which numbers almost 3 million. A report by the Washington post in 2018 claimed that Shiite fighters of Hazara Fatimoon brigades are rewarded with various luring incentives including salaries of \$500 to \$700 per month, a legal residence permit and a housing permit.¹²⁷

In an interview on BBC Persian with an ex-fighter of the Afghan Fatimoon brigade who fled to Europe with the Syrian refugees admits that before their deployment to Syria, they received basic training and then were airlifted by Mahan Air to the frontlines in Syria.

Therefore, these Afghan Hazaras are soldiers in someone else's war pushed by economic grief and religious loyalty. Although no exact numbers of the Afghan Hazara fighting in Syria can be known, it is believed that there are between 5000

¹²⁶ Ibid Peck, M., 2016

¹²⁷ Constable, P., 2018. Recruited by Iran to fight for Syrian regime, young Afghans bring home cash and scars. *The Washington Post*.

and 12000 Afghans fighting in Syria under the command of IRGC forces.¹²⁸ Furthermore, reports suggest that these Afghan Hazara fighters are considered to be Iran's long-term investment for its interest in Afghanistan. The rise of ISIS and the fear of the US influence in Afghanistan is what the Iranian regime takes as a serious threat to its national security. Therefore, it is believed that Iran is playing a double game by killing two birds with one stone. It can be said that Iran uses Syria as a training ground for these Afghans Shiite fighters while at the same time, Tehran uses them in their strategy for saving Assad.¹²⁹

Moreover, another least known Shiite group from the second category, fighting in Syria is the Pakistani Zeinabiyoun Brigade led by Seyed Abbas Mousavi who keeps a low profile due to threats posed by the Pakistani Inter-Service Intelligence agency or ISI. The militia is believed to have direct ties with the Iranian IRGC forces.¹³⁰ Just like other proxies, IRGC conscripted the Pakistani Shiite fighters to Syria as part of the proxies protecting the holy Shiites shrines.

According to the Fars news agency, after the systematic prosecution of the Shiite minorities in Pakistan, the IRGC forces formed the Zeinabiyoun Brigade to protect the Shiite in Pakistan. Therefore, Tehran recruited as many of these Shiites in Syria to not only militarily train them while at the same time, Tehran uses them in strengthening the defensive line of the Assad forces.¹³¹

Moreover, the last group of Shiites militias amongst the second category are the Yemenites Zaidi's who alike the Afghani and Pakistani Shiites go through similar kind of process and military training. Upon completing the two stages, the Houthis are sent back to their home in order to keep up the war against Saudi collation forces.¹³²

¹²⁸ Ibid

¹²⁹ Alfoneh, A., 2017. Shia Afghan Fighters in Syria. *Atlantic Council*.

¹³⁰ Ibid Alfoneh, A., 2018.

¹³¹ Peck, M., 2016. Doubling Down on Damascus Iran's Military Surge to Save the Assad Regime., pp.10–11.

And for further information about Pakistani Shiites fighters Alfoneh's article is recommended. Alfoneh, A., 2018. Tehran's Shia Foreign Legions. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*.

¹³² Ibid Peck, M., 2016

3.3.4. The Rise of ISIS-2014

The dramatic rise of ISIS brought about sea changes and shaped the geopolitical landscape in the Middle East. ISIS or The Islamic State of Iraq and Sham reshaped regional dynamics, which had an enormous impact on Iranian military engagement abroad. Along with the rise of ISIS came a new chapter in the Syrian crisis and Iran's approach to it. Therefore, it is believed that the rise of ISIS in 2014 presented Iran with both gains and challenges. In the short-term, Iran gained from the rise of ISIS. Following shadowy Iranian engagement in Syria, it was an opportunity for the IRGC forces to change their image in the eyes of the Iranian people who had been criticizing Iran's shadowy war in Syria. While in the long run, the rise of ISIS had serious consequences for Iran, both in Syria and in Iraq. The swift advance of ISIS in the Iraqi cities of Ramadi and Fallujah was such a shock that even the American style equipped army could not prevent their advance towards Baghdad. ISIS, without facing any resistance from the Iraqi army gained control of Mosul, and its forces pushed down to the Tigris river valley. The rapid advance of ISIS toward Baghdad forced a change in the Iranian leaders' attitude toward the developments in Iraq.¹³³

Historically Iraq has been a foe, but recently it became a strategic and regional ally, after the withdrawal of the American forces in 2011. Iran maintained close relations with the predominantly Shiite government of Baghdad. For Tehran, Iraq meant a lot, for a number of reasons, firstly, after the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, Iraqi airspace became a major air supply route for the Syrian regime.¹³⁴ It is estimated that Iran IRGC has taken thousands of flights to Damascus through Iraqi the airspace. These flights are alleged to have been carrying military Personal of IRGC and foreign proxies to the Syrian frontlines. Secondly, Iraq from the start of 2011 has been a major supplier of the Shiite fighters to the Assad regime.

¹³³ Ritter, S., Iran Deserves Credit for the Ruin of ISIS. *The American Conservative*. Available at: <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/iran-deserves-credit-for-the-ruin-of-isis/> [Accessed March 25, 2019].

¹³⁴ Fulton, W., Holliday, J. and Wyer, S., 2013. *Iranian strategy in Syria*. AEI's Critical Threats Project., pp.12-13

Unlike other Shiite fighters, the Iraqi Shiites fighters are more skilled in an unconventional war, and they have played a key role in combating the rebels in Syria. However, as ISIS was making rapid gains in Iraq, these militias or mercenaries had to leave the Syrian frontlines to get back to Iraq in order to fight the ISIS at their home.

The withdrawal of the Iraqi Shiites presented the Syrian regime with fighters shortages on the frontline. Therefore, the rapid rise of ISIS had a direct effect on Iranian efforts in fighting against the rebels in Syria. In Syria, the regime was almost on the verge collapse. Syria lost its major urban cities, including its main economic hub to ISIS. By August 2015, the regime was hanging on to control of a small swath of land, almost one-sixth of its territories.

3.3.5. Direct Engagement (September 2015-January 2017)

The rapid advance of ISIS towards Bagdad and Syria was a total game changer triggering a direct military engagement from the Iranian side. As Iranian efforts became in vain, Tehran approached Russian in September 2015 and in the same year on September 30, Russia launched its first military aerial campaign in Syria. The Russian entry into the Syrian war was secured as part of Suleiman's efforts. Suleimani, in July, paid several visits to Moscow; he unfurled a map of Syria to the Russians, showing Assad's losses. Senior regional sources recounted that "Suleimani put the map of Syria on the table. The Russians were very alarmed and felt matters were in steep decline and that there were real dangers to the regime. The Iranians assured them there is still the possibility to reclaim the initiative. At that time, Suleimani played a role in assuring them that we have not lost all our cards."¹³⁵

Therefore, Major General Qasim Suleimani's visit to Moscow is reckoned as the first step of encouraging Russian intervention in Syria which as a result

¹³⁵ Bassam, L., 2015. How Iranian general plotted out Syrian assault in Moscow. *Reuters*. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-soleimani-insigh/how-iranian-general-plotted-out-syrian-assault-in-moscow-idUSKCN0S02BV20151006> [Accessed March 26, 2018].

created a new Iranian-Russian alliance that completely reshaped the course of the Syrian War. According to a report by Reuters, after Suleimani guaranteed Russian entry into the Syrian War, Iran subsequently deployed hundreds of IRGC-GF Ground forces including units specialized in weaponry and assault operations, infantry and reconnaissance units to Syria, this time not as advisors but as direct combatants in support of Assad. Although many high-ranking Iranian officials rejected Iranian troops and IRGC-GF deployment in Syria, but it was later confirmed by some senior regional officials that Iran had actually deployed forces to Syria.¹³⁶

In the meantime, the direct intervention of the Iranian forces could also be observed from the casualties that took place before and after the Russian intervention. before October 2015, the bulk of casualties only belonged to one company or battalion. However, following the Russian intervention, Iranian forces casualties dramatically increased, and they were interestingly not only limited to one brigade but indeed the bulk of the deaths came from various units of the Iranian forces throughout Syria. If had Iran deployed one battalion, the bulk of the death toll would have been alone from the units or battalion deployed. Therefore, the concentration of losses of the small number of casualties from every unit suggested that Iran had also developed a new model for expeditionary forces shifting from TAA limited advisory policy to a more hybrid unconventional policy.¹³⁷

Moreover, Iran, following the Russian intervention, developed a unified command structure aimed at unifying all the expeditionary and IRGC-QF- GF forces under one chain of command. Iran embedded hundreds of its newly deployed soldiers and IRGC military officers from various units with the proxies and expeditionary forces for a short period of time. These units appeared to have stayed in the battleground until being replaced by the newly arrived forces. Among those embedded with the proxies, were military officers from various units of the army, IRGC-QF-GF, Basij forces with the ranks of lieutenants, and officers who in the

¹³⁶ Bassam, L., 2015. How Iranian general plotted out Syrian assault in Moscow. *Reuters*.

¹³⁷ Ibid

battlefields acted as battalion commanders for the proxy forces. Moreover, these battalion commanders in charge were reporting to the General command of IRGC forces that ends with Major General Qasim Suleimani and Major General Pakpour. This hierarchal chain of command allowed IRGC to direct all of its proxies and expeditionary forces as conventional combat forces, thus making it easy for the IRGC to command all of them under one order. Therefore, every unit of Iranian forces seemed to have sustained losses while being on deployment in Syria. By taking the above mention hypothesis, it could be said that Iran, following the Russian intervention, increased its efforts by actively jumping into the middle of the battlefield.¹³⁸

3.4. Concluding Remarks

When the Syrian uprising first broke out, the Iranians were already vocal in support of similar uprisings in the region and were keen to refer to them using glorious phrases such as ‘Islamic Awakening,’ but this was not extended to the Syrian uprising. This chapter concludes that there was a total lack of official Iranian foreign policy on Syria at the time the conflict started, and the reason for this is put forward as the close nature of the relationship between Tehran and Damascus and the possibility that Iran’s own agenda could be under threat if it supported regime change in Syria.

What is demonstrated throughout this study, is that Iran’s foreign policy since the advent of the Islamic revolution being concentrated on a neorealist and pragmatic approach to the crisis in Syria. The core objective of Iranian foreign policy through a pragmatic perspective has been survival in the anarchic international system by maximizing its interests. Therefore, to make sure, at all costs, that the Bashar Assad’s government is not toppled, Iran will do its utmost to save the regime of Bashar al Assad and as elaborated in the chapter Iranian support for the Assad regime has been vital. Therefore, in order to keep Assad in power,

¹³⁸ Ibid

Tehran, in its strategy, has adopted a multifaceted strategy that includes extensive, expensive, and integrated efforts.

Despite colossal material and human loss, Tehran remained confident in its strategy of saving Bashar al Assad. Its direct intervention in Syria has paid off, and Assad seems to be getting enormous gains against the rebels. As of April 2018, the Assad regime had gained control of almost the majority of its territory that once had been in the hands of the rebel opposition. All this would have never been possible without direct Iranian intervention.

Chapter VI

IMPACT OF THE SYRIAN WAR ON IRANIAN POLITICS

After eight years of war in Syria, Iran has been playing an important role in keeping Bashar al Assad's hold onto the power. In Syria, Iranian stakes are high, that is why Iran, along with Russia, put their weight behind the Assad regime in his fight against the rebels. With the duo support, Assad has gained a great momentum against the rebels by reclaiming the control of major parts of Syria. Therefore, a consensus of key characters from the leaders within military and political personal could be said to be at the core of Islamic republic multi-layered policy towards Syria. With Iran's policy in Syria inevitably colored by a wide range of actors, it can be clearly observed that domestic's matters heavily shape both Iranian's security concerns and its approach in Syria. Therefore, the Syrian War is arguably the most decisive war in Iranian history. Many remained supportive of the military engagement to save Bashar al Assad from the rebels. However, there were other politicians who believed Iran had no business in Syria. Mainly the hardliners camp believes that Syria is the key to containing foothold in the region. There were occasional opposition voices from the reformists who, for various reasons, questioned Iran's Syria policy and therefore, they sought criticism from the Hardliners front.

Before addressing to the various themes of debates among political elites in Iran, the thesis will shed light on major motivations played important role reshaping the Iranian Policy towards the Syrian War. In the later phase, the chapter aims at offering an account of debates over Iranian policy in Syria through the lens of both the reformists and hardliners. Moreover, this chapter also looks at two different phases of the Syrian crisis. Firstly, by giving some idea about the relations between the previous President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and neighboring Syria and then on to President Hassan Rouhani Era and the challenges he faced. The argument will be put forward that Reformists camp, even though winning two consecutive elections, failed to change the hardliners Syria's policy.

4. Major Motivations reshaping Iran's Policy towards the Syrian War

Among one of Iran's main priorities in Syria is to keep the political weight and balance of the region. Over the course of the Syrian crisis, Iran's regional rival powers, such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia are relatively dissatisfied with the current situation and are demanding a change in the balance of regional power. Iran regards the situation in Syria through the lens of a zero-sum game or game theory. The concept of the zero-sum game explains the situation in which players either win or lose their interests against each other. Therefore, the concept of the zero-sum game significantly fits the case of Syria. Regional actors such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar are practically engaged in financial, and arms support to opposition groups in Syria, and they hope to pave the way for the fall of Assad. Meanwhile, for Iran, the fall of Assad would not only deprive Tehran of Lebanon but would also place Iraq on the red line of Iran's new rift.¹³⁹ In addition to Saudi Arabia's interests, Turkey is also present in northern Iraq, whose policies are not in line with Iran. In this way, Jubin Goodarzi, in his article, "Iran: Syria as the first line of defense (2013)," calls Syria as the first line of defense for Iran.¹⁴⁰ The fall of Syria would also expose the western borders of Iraq to the pressure of the new Syrian government, which would terminate a strategic alliance with Iran and join the Arabian axis.

Shortly in Syria, on one side for Iran to keep the power balance, it is essential to provide the Syrian regime with the necessary support. However, on the other hand, the Saudis, Qatar, and Turkey have been supportive of the rebels, and they demand the ouster of Bashar al Assad. Therefore, with no doubt, a high intensity of competition is seen among these regional foes. If one loses the other wins and vice versa for Iran, if Assad falls, the new regime would be dependent on Sunni regional or trans-national alliances which would have a hostile stance toward

¹³⁹ Nejat, S.A. & Valandani, A.J., 2013. بررسی نقش و جایگاه جمهوری اسلامی ایران در بحران سوریه. , pp.40–46. Available at: http://prj.ui.ac.ir/article_20445_cbba4c04b7146c9e709b9d9b8f200a89.pdf

¹⁴⁰ Goodarzi, J. (2013). Iran: Syria as the first line of defense. *The Regional Struggle for Syria*. London: European Council on Foreign Relations. See page 25-33

Tehran.¹⁴¹ In other words, a shift in power in Syria would mean another loop in the chain of the regional rivals of Iran and the loss of a regional strategic alliance.

Secondly, with respect to Syria's geopolitical importance, Iranian officials consider Syria vital for their security in the region. Tehran's alliance with Damascus has provided Iran with numerous privileges. The alliance, being termed as an "Axis of Resistance," has given Tehran a strategic foothold in the region. Tehran considers Syria as a strategic gateway and as a bulwark against the Israeli government and most importantly as a conduit to its Lebanese mercenary, the Hezbollah.¹⁴² Also, the country can be a significant route to Europe through the Baniyas and Tartus on the Mediterranean coast, for the export of Iranian oil and gas.¹⁴³

Furthermore, Hezbollah is the crown jewel of the Iranian Revolution in the Middle East, as most of the assistance to Hezbollah emanates from Iran through Syrian territory. Therefore, it is essential for Iran to do whatever possible to rescue both its Arab ally and Hezbollah in Lebanon. From a geopolitical standpoint, Hezbollah, though considered weak, is an essential element for Tehran in its anti-Israeli rhetoric. With no doubt, the fall of the Assad regime would give rise to the emergence of a Sunni, pro-Saudi government that would be in every sense hostile toward Tehran. Therefore, with a Sunni government after the fall of Assad, there would be no guarantee whether it would allow Iran to replenish Hezbollah or not.

Alongside other motivations, Tehran also observes the crisis in Syria from an ideological point of view. After the regime change in 1979, for the new Islamic regime of Iran, anti-Zionism, and Anti-imperialism became the new prism of its

¹⁴¹ نجات سیدعلی، 2014. راهبردهای جمهوری اسلامی ایران و عربستان سعودی در قبال بحران سوریه pp.1–25. Available at: http://fp.ipisjournals.ir/article_18980_3c374d5133ef742c494bb350ba742e19.pdf [Accessed September 13, 2018].

¹⁴² نجات سیدعلی، 2014. رویکرد. For further see the article of Njeat Sayeed Ali published in persian سیاست خارجی جمهوری اسلامی ایران در قبال تحولات نوین خاورمیانه pp.1–16. Available at: <http://ensani.ir/file/download/article/20161213114039-10070-13.pdf> [Accessed October 21, 2018].

¹⁴³ نجات سیدعلی، 2014. راهبردهای جمهوری اسلامی ایران و عربستان سعودی در قبال بحران سوریه Ibid Nejat Ali

foreign policy and therefore it is believed to be the root cause of the Iranian support for the Syrian regime.¹⁴⁴

Moreover, religious ideology may also be pointed out as a unifying factor between these two countries. Religion plays a vital role in the domestic affairs of Iran, while religious motives lack a place in Tehran's foreign policy. However, such a case does not apply for the Syrian crisis, religious motives in Iran's Syria policy are perhaps an exception because historically it can be said that a considerable discrepancy exists between the revolutionary principles and Iranian foreign policy practice, which causes many observers to question what drives the Islamic Republic's foreign policy. Is it driven primarily by ideological or national interests? According to some, a clear case can be made for both. When on the one hand, the need for justice, Islamic solidarity and independence are all continuously mentioned in relation to the Palestinian situation, the equally legitimate Chechen struggle simply gets ignored for fear of antagonizing Russian interests. In another example of this, Muslim unity is mentioned as the driving motive to support Hamas and Hezbollah, but Iran also took the side of Christian Armenia in its war against their fellow Shia Azerbaijan to try to block the current of separatist Azerbaijani nationalism in Iran.¹⁴⁵

Sharing both a Shiite Islamic religious perspective and ethnic and cultural ties could be not the only effect on Iranian strategic policy. The pragmatism of Iranian foreign policy can be seen again in Iran's response to the protests in Hama in 1982. The events that transpired in Hama, Syria in 1982, caused a real test for Iran's pan-Islamic outlook. The Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood took control of Hama in March 1982, which prompted the Syrian regime to carry out a massacre, resulting in the deaths of over 10,000 people. Even though the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood had a clearly stated Islamist agenda and known Islamic credentials, Iran was silent about this atrocious massacre by the Syrian regime, for

¹⁴⁴ Ehteshami, A. and Hinnebusch, R.A., 2002. *Syria and Iran: Middle powers in a penetrated regional system*. P: 88-90.

¹⁴⁵ Sadjadpour, K., 2009. Reading Khamenei: The World View of Iran's Most Powerful ... page .14

the sake of not risking its own national interests. It is claimed by many political analysts that Iran kept its silence in exchange for the Syrian assistance against Iraq.¹⁴⁶

Meanwhile, Syria is home to almost 50 shrines that are important for Shiism and are located mostly in Damascus close to the Umayyad Mosque. The shrines of Sayyidnah Zaynab and Ruqayya and the Golden domed mosque are thought to be the holiest places of Shiite Islam after those located in Saudi and Iraq. From the very outset of the Syrian unrest, the protection of these Shiite sites particularly the shrines of Sayyida Ruqayya [daughter of Imam Hussein] and Sayyidnah Zaynab [daughter of Imam Ali] became a narrative of the Iranian policy toward Syria. Both shrines are believed to have been used as a foothold for the spread of Shiite religious influence. The Shiite sites are important for Iran in its export of the revolutionary ideology to the Shia community of Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq.¹⁴⁷ In addition, after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Iranian regime used Shiite sites as a focal point for organizing the Shiite militias to target the US presence in Iraq. Hence, one can conclude that the defense of the Shiite sites is fundamental to the narrative of the Iranian approach towards Syria. These sites have helped Iran to reinforce its influence over Shiites of the region and meanwhile, it has also played an essential role in absorbing Shiite fighters into its proxy war in Syria and Iraq.¹⁴⁸

Therefore, it is believed that Iran has promulgated its religious ideology with the defense of Shiite holy sites and placing importance on Mahdism. As a key strategy to generate popular support from the masses and for its aim to come out on top in both domestic and regional politics. As in Iraq, so too in Syria, the religious language has an apocalyptic feel, asserting the belief in the reappearance of their hidden Imam who is said to emerge at the end of time to establish justice on earth.

¹⁴⁶ Brown, R.E., Syria, Iran's "Strategic Province". *IranWire*. Available at: <https://iranwire.com/en/features/487> [Accessed March 29, 2018].

¹⁴⁷ Smyth, P., 2015. *The Shiite Jihad in Syria and its regional effects*. Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy. P: 4-8

¹⁴⁸ Ostovar, A., 2016. Sectarian Dilemmas in Iranian Foreign Policy: When Strategy and Identity Politics Collide. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/11/30/sectarian-dilemmas-in-iranian-foreign-policy-when-strategy-and-identity-politics-collide-pub-66288> [Accessed November 2, 2018].

In Shiite theology, there is a kind of holy dynasty of twelve infallible Imams that they claim was initiated by the great Imam Ali, the cousin, and son in law of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), with the twelfth in the chain being Imam Mahdi.¹⁴⁹

For the rise of the IRGC and its gaining foothold in Syrian territory, it has been necessary to enmesh the political and military program in the world view of Messianic Shiism. Fighting alongside the Assad regime, Iranian hardliners have installed the IRGC as the main military force in Syria. The IRGC and hardliners believe that their job is to clear the ground for the coming of their Imam and fight to spread their belief across the whole of the Middle East region or die trying. Indeed, their funerals take on the atmosphere of an intense religious ceremony as the dead are hailed to be noble martyrs for the cause and the flames of zealous passion are freshly stoked.¹⁵⁰

With the Quds Brigades head Qasim Suleimani proclaimed as the soldier of the Mahdi, Supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei, and his obedient people, plus the Revolutionary Guard in Syria, Iran officially consecrated these efforts as fighting terrorism by viewing them all through the religious narrative. Moreover, for its military endeavors, Iran has recruited Shiite volunteers from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Lebanon and in neighboring Iraq.¹⁵¹

In keeping with the revolutionary sense of comradeship, the hardliners camp makes full use of the sense of religious duty, bombarding its citizens from IRGC TV stations with images of the glorious martyrs who were willing to give all for the cause. Seeing itself as on the front line in the fight against Sunni extremism, such as the so-called Islamic state, the hardline camp is able to recruit Shiite participants from far and wide. Revealing the centrality of Mahdism, as it was, the glasses through which they see everything, the head of the IRGC Mohammad Ali

¹⁴⁹ Cappelletti, C., 2018. *Dynamics of the Iranian Role in the Syrian civil War*. thesis. Pp. 49-53. Available at: <http://etd.lib.metu.edu.tr/upload/12621990/index.pdf> [Accessed November 2018].

¹⁵⁰ Ibid

¹⁵¹ داعش می خواهد حرم حضرت زینب(س) را در عمق 50متری منفجر کند/اگر در سوریه و عراق با داعش نجنگیم باید در <http://rahvabnews.com/fa/news/74011/-داعش-می-خواهد-حرم-حضرت-زینب-را-در-عمق-50متری-منفجر-کند-اگر-در-سوریه-و-عراق-با-داعش-نجنگیم-باید-در-تهران-با-آنها-بجنگیم> Available at: <http://rahvabnews.com/fa/news/74011/-داعش-می-خواهد-حرم-حضرت-زینب-را-در-عمق-50متری-منفجر-کند-اگر-در-سوریه-و-عراق-با-داعش-نجنگیم-باید-در-تهران-با-آنها-بجنگیم> [Accessed November 2, 2018].

Jafari declared that , “The formation of Daesh and Takfiri groups and the events that occurred in the past years are paving the ground for the emergence of Imam Mahdi, and you can now see the positive results in the readiness of nearly 200,000-armed youth in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen.”¹⁵² Jafari mentioned that Iran train troops inside and outside of Iran to be a worldwide united force.

Therefore, hardliners took advantage of people’s religious sentiment, which, as a result, not only changed the political configuration at home but at the regional level. At home, they succeeded in defusing people reactions against the Iranian intervention in Syria while at the regional level, mainly in Syria, the Iranian regime successfully gathered thousands of Shiite fighters in support for the Assad struggle.

As a result, while looking at all the determinants of the Iranian policy toward Syria, one can reach the point that Syria has a strategic value for Tehran, with its close border with Lebanon, Iraq, and Israel. Moreover, for Iran to channel its assistance to Hezbollah and other mercenaries across the region, it is essential to keep Bashar al Assad in power. If Assad falls, Iran would lose a lot of interests in the region, the falling of Assad would be a nightmare for the Iranian regime. A new government in Damascus would almost certainly be Sunni and rather unfriendly to Iran, and Iran’s regional interests would be severely damaged, and it would not only lose its only Arab ally in the heart of the Middle East, but also its access to its strategic interests across the region. Therefore, Iran has rigorously insisted on the importance of Syria, and as an ex-Iranian foreign minister Ali Akbar Velati in his speech claimed that: “Syria is the Golden ring of the axis of resistance, and it is our duty to support it and avoid losing it to the Zionists.”¹⁵³

¹⁵² Iran's Revolutionary Guards (2016): We have armed 200,000 fighters in the region. *Middle East Monitor*. Available at: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20160115-irans-revolutionary-guards-we-have-armed-200000-fighters-in-the-region/> [Accessed October 2, 2018].

¹⁵³ Check the Persian Article: وظیفه | خبرگزاری باشگاه خبرنگاران | آخرین اخبار ایران و جهان | Yjc, 2016. ماست که از سوریه به عنوان حلقه طلایی محور مقاومت حمایت کنیم/ در تامین نیازهای دفاعی از روسیه مشکلی نداریم. <https://www.yjc.ir/fa/news/6669272/-حلقه-طلایی-محور-مقاومت-حمایت-کنیم-در-تامین-نیازهای-دفاعی-از-روسیه-مشکلی-نداریم> [Accessed October 7, 2018].

Meanwhile, many Iranian officials have made similar statements. One of the top Iranian Shia clerics and confidant of the supreme leader referred to Syria as the 35th province of Iran. To directly quote him, he was cited in the following way: “Syria is the 35th province of Iran, and If they attack us and want to take Syria or Khuzestan, the priority is to keep Syria because if we keep Syria we can also keep Khuzestan, but if we lose Syria, we will not even be able to hold Tehran.”¹⁵⁴

4.1. Debates in Iran over the War in Syria: Hardliners vs. Reformists

Decision making on Syria has been affected by the considerably polarized camps of the reformists on the one hand and the hardliners on the other. The latter looking on the matter through their heavily religious apocalyptic glasses, with an end game narrative of good (Iran) against evil (USA/Israel), so threats to Iran’s security and their activities in Syria are perceived as coming from the US and its allies and proxies.

It should be mentioned that the IRGC has been set up and mandated to protect the purity of the Iranian revolution’s religious ideology, as stated in the constitution. Then with the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the hardliners in Iran took the opportunity to spin their narrative in order to gain domestic support, accusing America of imposing on other countries its own values in order to control them and triggering revolutions in some cases, while in other cases like Iraq direct military invasion. So naturally, the hardliners considered their own opposite at home from the reformists as an extension of US operations and therefore sought to use all the means available to silence and nullify their efforts. During the first phase of the Syrian crisis that coincided with the presidential term of President

¹⁵⁴روشن سایی، 2012. طائب: اگر بخواهند: Iranian officials’ statements about the importance of Syria: *روزنامه دنیای اقتصاد*. سوریه یا خوزستان را بگیرند، حفظ سوریه اولویت دارد طائب-اگر بخواهند-سوریه یا-خوزستان-را-بگیرند-حفظ-سوریه-اولویت-دارد بخش-خبر-514447/64-<https://donya-e-eqtasad.com/-514447/64-بخش-خبر> [Accessed march 6, 2019].

Ahmadinejad, reformist's camp was severely constricted, and since then it has only got harder for reformists in Iran to operate.¹⁵⁵

The reformists in stark contrast to their hardliner opponents suggest that in order to strengthen the Islamic Republic, more cooperation with the West is necessary. Many reformists have experience living in Western nations while getting their education and see a need to generate economic investment there. The core beliefs of the reformists can be found in Mohammad Khatami's dialogue of civilizations and Hassan Rouhani's promotion of the method of engagement as these slogans highlight the belief that the maintaining of Iran's founding ideology has to be in unison with all the paraphernalia of the modern nation-state. Therefore, in the case of Syria, there are as well various discernible areas on which the hardliners and reformists criticize each other's as in the following way.¹⁵⁶

The first debate between hardliners and reformists focuses on political aspects of the Iranian involvement in Syria, whereas hardliners claim that Iranian involvement is inevitable for the strategic means, reformists argue that Iran's involvement is irrelevant and unnecessary. The hardliners say the Islamic Republic of Iran has an important strategic objective in Syria and must have a strong presence in the country to play a leading role, whereas the reformers see Iranian involvement in Syria as unnecessary and voice serious reservations about being allied with the Assad Regime. Assad's massacring of protestors at the start of the Syrian civil war was something actually supported and encouraged by the hardliners of Iran.

The rationale of hardliners for Iran's presence in Syria was both a perceived vulnerability should the regime fall and the need for a united Shia force in the face of Saudi funded "Salafi" Jihadi groups. The reformists see such groups as strategic pawns being used for merely political ends, but the hardliners see the matter through

¹⁵⁵Brumberg, D., 2018. Iran's Hardliners and Reformists and the Syria Gambit. Available at: http://arabcenterdc.org/policy_analyses/irans-hardliners-and-reformists-and-the-syria-gambit/ [Accessed March 25, 2019].

¹⁵⁶اصولگرایان مریخی و اصلاح‌طلبان ونوسی! / معادله سوریه و پروژه تقویت اصولگرایان در ایران 2018. Available at: <https://www.rouydad24.ir/fa/news/160779/-اصلاح‌طلبان-ونوسی-اصولگرایان-مریخی-پروژه-تقویت-اصولگرایان-در-ایران> [Accessed April 10, 2019].

the religiously tinted windows and therefore see themselves as the pure and true Shias fighting the corrupted and deviant terrorists. The reformists claim that the most effective and sensible way to combat the extremist jihadi groups is not by stirring up religious sentiment but by clever and strategic diplomacy. Reformists attempted to forward this mentality and give Iran a place at the table for the January 2014 Geneva II Syria peace talks.

The second area of the debates where real factions differ in Iran is regarding the threat and emergence of Daesh in 2014. While the reformists of Iran did not consider Daesh to be an influence within their nation, the hardliners proclaimed that the Islamic State group in Syria and its increasing power was a threat to national security that Iran had to actively combat in neighboring Syrian territory. The Iranian Supreme Leader declared in many Friday sermons the need for Iran to counter the threat saying, “If these martyrs did not stop the enemy...we would have to fight the ISIS in Kermanshah and Hamedan and other provinces.”¹⁵⁷ He was referring to Iranians killed on Syrian soil and pointing a need for Iranian intervention in Syria. IRGC Quds Forces commander General Qasim Suleimani has spoken on several occasions along the same lines, reflecting the hardliner's concern about mainly Sunni Baluchi and Kurdish border regions and their potential for an alliance with Jihadi groups.

However, in stark contrast, these fears were not initially shared by reformists as they asserted that the influence of these kind of groups like Daesh would not be able to penetrate Iran because of Iran's deep sense of identity, distinct culture, and language. Reformist politician Mustafa Kawkabiyani was foremost in championing this view in 2014, but after the Islamic State (IS) declared a “caliphate” in Iraq on June 2014, the reformist camp also began to see the group as a threat to Iran's security.¹⁵⁸ Reformists and hardliners alike then view these

¹⁵⁷Statement of the Iranian Supreme leader about the deaths of Iranian fighters in Syria. بیانات در دیدار جمعی از خانواده‌های شهدای مدافع حرم. *KHAMENEI.IR*. 2015. Available at: <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=32186> [Accessed March 9, 2019].

¹⁵⁸آخرین خبر... اگر کشور با تئوری‌های اصلاح‌طلبان اداره می‌شد 2016. Available at: <http://akharinkhabar.ir/analysis/3916321> [Accessed March 9, 2019].

developments as a serious threat as was the case with Saddam Hussein before, now they saw that anti-Shia sentiment was brewing in a dangerous form and in their regional bordering countries.

Therefore, the term, “Iranian Islam” from the mouth of the previous President Ahmadinejad was widely revoked across the country after ISIS launched a large-scale attack towards Baghdad and Damascus reaching almost few kilometers to the Iraqi capital. The incident had a seismic impact across Iran with hardliners able to use it to ignite both Shia and nationalist emotions to drum up public support in Syria against their Sunni terrorist enemies⁸. These attack which the Iranian government said were carried out by ‘Takfiri separatist groups supported by the reactionary Arab countries seemed to add fuel to an already raging fire of Iranian religious and nationalist feeling.¹⁵⁹

It can be seen that while the military operations of the Iranians in Syria have a unifying effect at home, this may well be focused on to deliberately shift attention away from Iran’s propping up of the controversial Assad Regime. Iran’s hardliners support their involvement in Syria as a religious duty to protect the holy Shia shrines there. By 2015 the number of Iranian dead in Syria surpassed one thousand, but interestingly the regime was trying to prevent the public from 40th-day ritual mourning services which have served previous years as a way of the regime’s wartime mobilizing efforts. And moreover, the conflict was barely given air-time in the media as way to try to not get the masses too mournful about it, but then with the IS terror attacks in 2017-18 and the effect they had on the country the regime began to step up its hardliner religiously driven narrative to stoke up the nation against its enemies. Officials in the government also put forward that these attacks were at the same time part of a Western conspiracy to destabilize Iran.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ Bajoghli, N., 2018. Did a Terrorist Attack Just Save the Iranian Regime? *Foreign Policy*. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/09/26/did-a-terrorist-attack-just-save-the-iranian-regime/> [Accessed March 10, 2019].

¹⁶⁰Fathollah-Nejad, A., 2018. Iran: Fighting 'terror' publicly, mourning the dead secretly. *Syria / Al Jazeera*. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/iran-fighting-terror-publicly-mourning-dead-secretly-180430140249437.html> [Accessed March 10, 2019].

Moreover, the domestic debate over Syria increased in late 2015 alongside the increase in Iranian military officers being killed there, and the debate turned to focus on the country intensifying its support for President Bashar al-Assad. Huge murals glorifying the nations dead in the capital Tehran showed the painful price of war. Although Iranian losses in Syria are not comparable in the scale of loss to the 80s Iraq-Iran war, which cost hundreds of thousands of Iranian lives but many worries about where this one is heading. Both 2015 and 2016 were years that saw an increase in mourning as the Iranian Republic saw the loss of one of its top generals Hossein Hamedani, two colonels and nine other members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC).¹⁶¹

Therefore, the deaths of two high ranking commanders in Syria sparked open criticism from the reformist side, by arguing that “why Iranian commanders should be lost this much easily.” This is a mistake that should not have been repeated again as it was made during Iraq-Iran war,” drawing similarities to the situation in Iraq in the 80s when Iran also lost leading figures from the military.¹⁶² Therefore, in response to some of the deaths of IRGC fighters, the reformist’s camp argued that military intervention in Syria was such a grave mistake that cost Iran losing its top military generals in the Syrian soil. While on the other hand the hardliners see Iran’s military actions in Syria as important to combat the threats, whereas the reformists make the point that was Iran to keep losing leading generals in Syria and Daesh to come to Iran’s borders, they would no longer have their most competent military leading to defend the nation.

In addition, the last debate or yet another area of disagreement between the hardliners and the reformists on Iran’s Syria policy is over the financial fallouts of the crisis and its impacts on the Iranian economy. The financial fallouts of the

¹⁶¹ Bucala, P. and Kagan, F.W., 2016. *Iran's Evolving Way of War: How the IRGC Fights in Syria*. American Enterprise Institute, Critical Threats Project

¹⁶² MacMillan, A. & MacMilla, A., 2015. As Iranian deaths in Syria rise, debate opens at home. *The Daily Star Newspaper - Lebanon*. Available at: <https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2015/Oct-28/320521-as-iranian-deaths-in-syria-rise-debate-opens-at-home.ashx> [Accessed March 22, 2019].

Iranian have singled further area of complaint for reformists to voice their anger about the economic cost of Iran's foreign policies. Reformist's camp accuses their hardliners counterparts of spending billions of dollars abroad that must have been spent instead at home, in support of the Syrian president Bashar al Assad. The reformist official also blamed the protests of 2017-18, to be motivated by the regimes spending in Syria, as it can be clearly seen from slogans of people shouting such as "My life for Iran, not for Gaza or Lebanon," against economic cost of Iran's foreign policies.

Prominent reformists political sciences professor Sadiq Ziba Kalam at the University of Tehran in 2017, referred to the slogans chanted at the protests of December 2017, neither Gaza nor Lebanon, said that "Iran comes first to me than the other countries, he was also quoted as Palestine is the first priority of Palestinians, the same for Lebanese Lebanon comes first. Therefore the slogan neither Gaza nor Lebanon, my soul is for Iran is right and for me comes Iran and Iran's interests first. According to him, these slogans are perfectly correct, and it means that when inside home people are hungry, we do not have to give priority to any other countries. Therefore, the national capital of the country must primarily be spent at home rather than being spent abroad.¹⁶³

The same criticism was addressed in June 2018 by the member of parliament, Behrouz Bonyadi, after boldly condemning the justification for the violent crackdown on the protests of the government by claiming they were triggered by the US, he went on to explain how Iran's policies in the region had come at the cost of "60 billion US dollars."¹⁶⁴

¹⁶³ Pro. Sadiq Ziba Kalam views on the slogans shouted at the protests in 2018, against the regime interventionist policy in the Middle East! جوان آنلاین، 2014. زیباکلام: شعار نه غزه، نه لبنان شعار درستی بود Available at: <http://www.javanonline.ir/fa/news/661258/بود-درستی-شعار-نه-لبنان-نه-غزه-شعار-زیباکلام> [Accessed April 10, 2019].

¹⁶⁴Condemnation of the Iranian spending abroad by Behrouz Bonyadi a reformists member of parliament نماینده مجلس: پوتین و اسد ما را قربانی می کنند Available at: <https://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/812048/> [Accessed April 10, 2019].

However, on the other hand, the hardliners camp emphasizes that supporting the Syrian regime is the moral and religious duty of Iran to use all its options available at hand in order to save their national interests abroad. As Ayatollah Khamenei was quoted many times during his Friday sermons that the Iranian regime will keep Bashar al Assad at any cost. While at the same view another hardline politician, Ali Fallahian, a member of Iran's Assembly of Experts and a former intelligence minister, was quoted as it is the religious and moral duty of Iran to save up Bashar al Assad financially even if these aids cost Iran financial fallouts at home as he was quoted "we have to eat just once a day or fast."¹⁶⁵

Taking into consideration, the remarks made by both camps give a clear vision of cracks between the hardliners and reformists as it could be clearly seen the reformists, on one hand, have showed their discontent with the regime policy in Syria while on the other hand, the hardliners camp have defended regime policy and IRGC intervention in Syria. Therefore, the majority of political pundits believe that the Syrian crisis marked a change of configuration in Iran politics. Iranian reformist, although winning two consecutive terms were cut off from having any access to political power by their hardliner's counterparts. However, questions arise here, such as: How the Syrian crisis played an important role in the power configuration of Iran? And how Iranian hardliners succeeded to claw back the power they had lost to the reformist's camp?

Therefore, to answer these questions, the matter can be revisited throughout the different phases of the Syrian crisis, which witnessed substantial political reshuffling in Iran.

¹⁶⁵ Ali Fallahian's a hardline politician statement about the financial support to the Syrian regime. *Tasnim*. Available at: <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1393/01/08/323166/-گرایش-اقتصاد-مقاومتی-برای-مقابله-با-غرب-و-تحریم-ها-است> [Accessed March 10, 2019].

4.2. Empowerment of the Hardliners during the Presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

When the trouble first started in Syria, it was during the latter term of the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, in whose time the hardliners grew to dominate. Not expecting the so-called Arab spring to spread to Syria, the leadership in Tehran could be seen in vocal support for the uprisings in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia. Iran took the usual stance, seeing it as a people's revolt, standing up to the regimes that were agents and allies of the West, but when the peoples opposition flared up in Syria the hardliners could not support it in the same way as in North Africa because they didn't want to oppose their important ally in the region. Iran, therefore, rejected the credibility of those rising up against the Assad regime by accusing them of being pawns of foreign powers.

Although military activities of Iran in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and the across the Middle East had massive cost both economically and in terms of the loss of lives but in spite of this, the Iranian government adopted a zero-tolerance policy on any sign of criticism of its involvement abroad. Not just active political reformists but ordinary citizens were also threatened or arrested. At the time of Ahmadinejad, the issue of Syria was a kind of forbidden topic, and the hardliners just used it to expand the domestic influence on policymaking.

Therefore, the initial phase of the Syrian crisis meant that the hardliners could become more dominant inside Iran and in the meantime, they strongly recommended Bashar al-Assad to respond in full force to the revolt to put an end to it. The hardliners, who put down nonviolent Green Movement of 2009-10 through a fierce crackdown, not surprisingly suggested the Syrian regime to not to tolerate rebels and employ harshest measures. However, on the other hand, most of the reformists were in favor of the Green Movement and were calling for caution in Iran's support for Syria.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ Sahimi, M., 2016. Iran's Leaders Disagree on Propping Up Syria's Assad. *The National Interest*. Available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/irans-leaders-disagree-propping-syrias-assad-16688> [Accessed March 11, 2019].

During this period of the crisis, the hardliners who insisted about the need for Assad to stay in power and the need for Iran to support him gave Syrian regime billions of dollars in aid. Alongside financial aid was considerable support of man on the ground from military advisors, Lebanese Hezbollah soldiers to non-Iranian Shiite militants who were recruited and trained by the IRGC. The hardliners claimed that without taking the battle to Syria, the battle would come to their homelands in Khuzestan. Very revealing words were declared in February 2013 by Hojjat al-Islam Mehdi Taeb, head of Ayatollah Khamenei's think-tank Ammar Strategic Center, at a meeting with university student members of the Basij paramilitary force was quoted as: "Syria is the 35th province of Iran and is a strategic province for us. If the enemy attacks us and wants to appropriate either Syria or Khuzestan [an Arab-populated Iranian province bordering Iraq's Basra], the priority is that we keep Syria. If we keep Syria, we can keep Khuzestan too. But if we lose Syria, we cannot keep Tehran."¹⁶⁷

In contrast, the reformists, linking the fate of Iran with Assad has caused some clearly expressed opposition from within the reformist camp, in spite of the risk of house arrest for their perceived dissidence. They agree that it is important not to see Syria falling into the hands of enemy Sunni groups funded by Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the Gulf countries, but disagree that Assad should remain in the office. Other calls from reformists for moderation and a diplomatic approach to Syria came from the former President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. It was interesting to see when he delivered a speech, in which he sympathized with the innocents Syrians, as being victims of the chemical attacks and the weapons used by the regime. However, the Iranian Labor News Agency (ILNA or in Persian Khbar Guzari Kari Iran) falsified his words to the effect that Syrian government could not be explicitly be blamed. Rafsanjani's Speech was an indicator of the reformist's liberal stance that seeking a diplomatic solution is a must. Threats

¹⁶⁷Hojjat al-Islam Mehdi Taeb head of the Ammar Strategic Center statements about the Iranian support to Syria. اگر به سوریه و! اگر به سوریه و خوزستان حمله نظامی شود، اولویت نظام دفاع از سوریه خواهد بود. Available at: <https://melimazhabi.com/اگر-به-سوریه-و-خوزستان-حمله-نظامی-شود-اولویت-نظام-دفاع-از-سوریه-خواهد-بود/> [Accessed March 11, 2019].

from the hardliners in both direct and indirect ways quickly put a stop to the opposition from the reformist's camp, and once again the conservative hardliners of Iran had it their way.¹⁶⁸

Furthermore, even before the uprising and the subsequent crisis in Syria, the Iranian hardliners from the IRGC had already firmly been established in a very dominant position during this phase of the Syrian crisis. The IRGC since having played a key part during the Iran-Iraq War in the eighty's, had been able to exert significant influence over Iranian politics. It could be observed in the Ahmadinejad era that the IRGC took a continually assertive stance, that being the first time they declared their own foreign policy agenda. At that time, they had also increased their involvement in the economy, with unprecedented government energy and construction contracts worth billions. Indeed, with nearly all of the Ahmadinejad cabinet being from amongst the IRGC or at least strongly allied with them, the scene was set for the emerging power.¹⁶⁹

However, as the war broke out in the neighboring Syria, the IRGC was able to exploit the situation and gain even more strength and license to carry out Iranian policy. They have been able to bypass conventional methods in Syria by uniting other militant groups driven by Shi'a religious ideology like Hezbollah. Iran has ensured access to Syria for Shi'a fighters from Afghanistan and Iraq. Asaib Ahl al-Haqq (AAH- The league of Righteous), Hezbollah Brigades, and Kataib Sayyid al- Shuhada (The Masters of the Martyrs Brigade), are all Shi'a militant groups who are active in Syria and who have orders and funding assistance directly from the IRGC. Moreover, these groups justify their presence in Syria by expressing the need to protect this holy site as one of the pilgrimage sites for Shi'as is the Sayyidah Zainab Shrine in the outskirts of Damascus to the

¹⁶⁸ Rafael, H., 2013. فیلم کامل اظهارات هاشمی رفسنجانی در مورد مباران شیمیایی دولت سوریه. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FesLY0G3UPM> [Accessed March 11, 2019].

For further information Iran: Rafsanjani Syria Remarks 'Distorted'(2013). Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-rafsanjani-syria-criticism/25092999.html> [Accessed March 22, 2019].

¹⁶⁹ Connell, M. & Katzman, K., 2008. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps: Military and Political Influence in Today's Iran. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/events/the-islamic-revolutionary-guard-corps-military-and-political-influence-in-todays-iran/> [Accessed March 12, 2019].

south and at the same time, they fight in support of the Assad regime in rural areas outside of Damascus. It was reported that Iran managed to assemble a considerable force of Syrians from the Shi'a and Alawite sects by the name (Jaysh al-Sha'bi or People Army).¹⁷⁰For the IRGC to achieve this, they must have had affirmation from Supreme Leader Khamenei. Therefore, it was not surprising that both Khamenei and Ahmadinejad provided unequivocal support for the IRGC for their intervention in Syria.

All in all, the scale of the Iranian and Syrian cooperation during this phase coinciding with the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of the Syrian crisis were at peak. Despite initial criticism from the reformist's camp, Ahmadinejad and Ayatollah Khamenei favored Military Corporation with the Syrian regime; both men consistently promised Assad their full support Iranian regime at the hand of hardliners continued to stand side by side with Assad in his fight to hold the rebels at bay.

4.3. Questioning the Official Policy during the Presidency of Hassan Rouhani

The course of the events in Syria took another turn when the reformists in IR won the election in May 2013. This phase of the crisis was also characterized by the rise of ISIS, which spread its presence in Syria. ISIS shifted the dynamics of the crisis making the US and the European countries change their priorities. Where in the first phase, the US policies aimed at changing the regime, in the second phase, the US reprioritized its policies and focused on eliminating ISIS instead of regime change in Syria. Accordingly, debates of this phase were informed by the necessities of changing strategies presented by all parties involved in Syria.

By the time Rouhani came on the scene in August 2013 the war in Syria had been going on for two years and at the start, he was expected to get engaged in a more diplomatic way of moving forward. However, before we go into the details of

¹⁷⁰ Akbarzadeh, S. & Conduit, D., 2016. *IRAN IN THE WORLD: President Rouhani's foreign policy*: PALGRAVE MACMILLAN. Page 137-138

Rouhani's policies and of the way in which he dealt with the Syrian crisis, a couple of points related to the power configuration in Iran need to be emphasized. The first point was that despite Rouhani secured clear-cut electoral support, he was not able to get the full control of the security policymaking process. Another point that needs to be underscored is that the hardliners never let Rouhani get fully engaged with the situation of forces on the ground in Syria. As a result of this power configuration, Rouhani's involvement, in particularly at the beginning of his first term, was anything but decisive. Therefore, before Rouhani had actually made any official statement on Syria, there was a lot of speculation in Iranian media reportedly leaked from the Presidents inner circle, claimed that the new government was to pursue a more soft policy towards Syria.¹⁷¹

However, the policy of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani in Syria came in the context of harsh US economic sanctions and international ostracization. The newly established government in Tehran approached the Syrian situation from having been subjected to strong criticism, and Rouhani attempted to mend broken relations with the international community on the nuclear issue in order to ease sanctions. At first, there was a much softer policy on Syria as a way for Tehran to enhance its negotiating power in nuclear talks, but Iran knew all too well the geopolitical importance of their border sharing ally that they were not keen on losing.

Efforts to assert Iran's interests in the region were underway right from the start of Rouhani coming to office, and he clearly reflected an approach in harmony with the international community. An example of this could be seen in a press conference back in August 2013, when President Rouhani declared that "The solution to the Syrian crisis is a negotiation between all Syrian groups on one side and the Damascus government on the other, small terrorists coming to Syria from abroad should be expelled", and he "strongly condemned the idea of foreign-backed

¹⁷¹ Sadjadpour, K., 2013. Iran's Unwavering Support to Assad's Syria. *Syria: A Wicked Problem for All*, 6(8), pp.11–13.

terrorists in Syria, reiterating that “bloodshed in the Arab country must immediately come to a halt.”¹⁷²

This was a considerable shift in rhetoric in relation to the Syrian opposition that must not be underestimated because an Iranian President had never before suggested that there were any justified causes with Syrian rebel groups because the view of the previous IRGC/Ahmadinejad administration was that the Syrian crisis came from outside forces conspiring and that all the rebel groups posing threats to the Syrian government were to be simply dismissed as terrorists.

Meanwhile, Rouhani held the view that the opposition rebel groups in Syria had to have a place at the negotiating table in discussions on Syria’s future, and therefore he gave some legitimacy to the opposition, and he also insisted on the idea that the international community had a leading part to play in peace talks. Meanwhile, the hardliners of the IRGC and their agenda in Syria was running on a completely different course, and the policy of Rouhani was a real obstacle for them. For the anti-Assad forces to be given a role in Syria’s future and for Assad to be removed would fly in the face of the IRGC and their plans for dominance in the Levant most specifically in Syria and Lebanon.

Moreover, Soon after being elected in June 2013, Rouhani had also caused a friction with the hardliners when he pointed out some inconsistencies and double standards in the Iranian policy which on the one hand rejected the harsh crackdown of the Bahraini government against Shiite protesters, while at the same time failed to condemn the Syrian regime’s brutality in dealing with its people’s uprising. As he clearly stated that, "We should not describe as oppressive brutal actions in an enemy country while refraining from calling the same actions oppressive if they take place in a friendly country." He said, "Brutality must be called brutality."¹⁷³

¹⁷² President Hassan Rouhani’s First Press Conference: U.S. Led Sanctions against Iran are Aimed at Exerting Pressure on the Iranian Nation. *Iran Watch*. Available at: <https://www.iranwatch.org/library/governments/iran/president/president-hassan-rouhanis-first-press-conference-us-led-sanctions-against-iran-are-aimed-exerting> [Accessed March 15, 2019].

¹⁷³ Erdbrink, T., 2013. President-Elect of Iran Says He Will Engage with the West. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/30/world/middleeast/president-elect-of-iran-says-he-will-engage-with-the-west.html> [Accessed March 16, 2019].

However, Rouhani's strong reaction against the Syrian regime came right after the Syrian regime use of chemical weapons, killing nearly 1,000 people in Ghouta and Damascus. Thereafter, Hassan Rouhani strongly condemned the incident, and he called for an international ban on such weapons.¹⁷⁴ Without mentioning a name of who used them, he nonetheless tweeted, "Iran gives notice to the international community to use all its might to prevent the use of chemical weapons anywhere in the world, esp. in #Syria."¹⁷⁵

Hence, by not blaming the opposition, he left an open possibility that the Assad regime was guilty and therefore it is believed that he made a very significant statement which was at odds with both the hardliners and Moscow who blamed the rebels. Moreover, right after this incident, Rouhani was also quoted to have said strong words to the army commanders of the IRGC such as "we oppose chemical weapons. Whatever group or individual in whatever place uses these weapons, we will condemn it, and it is unacceptable for us."¹⁷⁶

Iranians had dark memories of being the target of chemical weapons in the hands of Saddam Hussain in the gruesome conflict between Iraq and Iran during eighties, therefore, to strengthen his statement, Rouhani reminded them of their past experiences at the hands of Saddam. All these statements given by Rouhani were significant because they gave rise to speculations that Rouhani supported the overthrow of Assad even though he avoided commenting on the issue directly.

In addition, Hassan Rouhani also baffled many observers right after the cancelation of Iran's involvement In January 2014 Geneva II peace talks. Hassan Rouhani was quoted that If Iran were given an opportunity, he would have fully supported a mandate as a way to try to bring about peace in Syria. Rouhani's eagerness to collaborate with other countries on Syria took many by surprise. Six

¹⁷⁴ Torbati, Y., 2013. Iran's Rouhani acknowledges chemical weapons killed people in Syria. *Reuters*. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-iran-idUSBRE97N06P20130824> [Accessed March 16, 2019].

¹⁷⁵ Rouhani, H., 2013. Iran gives notice to international community to use all its might to prevent use of chemical weapons anywhere in the world, esp. in #Syria. Available at: <https://twitter.com/hassanrouhani/status/372267413242273792> [Accessed March 16, 2019].

¹⁷⁶ Akbarzadeh, S. & Conduit, D., 2016. *IRAN IN THE WORLD: president rouhanis foreign policy*: PALGRAVE MACMILLAN.

months into the job, Rouhani had attempted to cooperate with the outside world on a solution for the terrible crisis in Syria to make Iranian foreign policy closer to the Western nations. This did not amount to a very dramatic change but a slightly different position from Tehran.¹⁷⁷ As Iran was always loyal to the Syrian government and threatening military action in support of the Damascus regime, the arrival of Rouhani put that into question as he generated optimism of a more inclusive approach to the crisis by working with the international community together.

However, Rouhani's honeymoon indeed proved to be short-lived, and therefore certain factors are believed to be behind Hassan Rouhani's failure of changing Iranian policy discourse towards Syria, yet three major factors such as the IRGC involvement in the Syrian crisis, the failure of Geneva II 2014 peace talks, and the rapid emergence of the ISIS, are believed to be the major factors that restricted the area for Hassan Rouhani in changing the Iranian policy discourse towards the Syria crisis and therefore to meticulously understand the matter each of the factor will be elaborated as in the following way.

4.3.1. Challenges to President Hassan Rouhani's Stance

Firstly, and foremost among one of the major factors that restricted the area for President Hassan Rouhani in changing the Iranian policy discourse towards Syria, was the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The IRGC continued to prevent Rouhani from following an influential policy in Syria, where they have increasingly become engaged since the previous administration. According to Al-monitor shortly before the President Rouhani's appointment in July 2013, there was stated in an article on an ultra-conservative website Ya Lasarat Hussain (2013) linked to the IRGC "Hassan Rouhani cannot promote a ceasefire in Syria, nor it is within his jurisdiction to do so."¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁷ Ibid

¹⁷⁸ Salihi, 2013. *بیائثرات - سردار جوانی: آتش بس در کار نیست*. Available at: <http://www.yalasarat.com/vdcfydv.w6djlaggiw.html> [Accessed April 17, 2019]. Check also

In the meantime, according to Akbarzadeh (2016), a media connected to the IRGC always promoted a brutal approach to Syria. After the deaths of three IRGC soldiers in the district near to the Sayiddah Zainab Shrine, Javan a pro-IRGC newspaper, reported the incident in August 2013 as that was at the start of Rouhani's presidency, ignoring it two months before in June when it actually occurred. An influential Shi'a Iraqi figure who sits on the Supreme Islamic Council of Iraq warned of further rifts between the President and the IRGC and mentioned that Rouhani wants to see Assad resign from his post in Syria.¹⁷⁹

Therefore, President Rouhani from the very first was cautious of the IRGC role in engaging into the internal politics. Therefore, in his numerous speeches, he warned IRGC's role and its engagement in the politics both directly and indirectly. Rouhani in September 2013 in an annual meeting directly told the IRGC commanders that "the IRGC should understand the politics very well but should not intervene in it because it belongs to the whole Iranian nation,"¹⁸⁰

Meanwhile, he also indirectly pointed to the role of IRGC to stay out of politics by saying that the IRGC should take an example of the Iranian military for being natural in the political matters.¹⁸¹ President Rouhani has put emphasis on the conventional foreign ministry overseeing and commanding foreign policy as has been reported in foreign affairs by foreign minister Zarif, who said the ministry should function "as the central organ for planning and executing Iran's foreign policy." This might, in fact, not be possible because of the IRGC's influence of policy in the area they are specifically focused on.¹⁸²

Tehran, A.A.-M.C.in, 2013. Iranians Differ on Military Intervention in Syria. *Al*. Available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/08/iranians-split-on-supporting-assad.html> [Accessed March 17, 2019].

¹⁷⁹ Akbarzadeh, S. & Conduit, D., 2016. *IRAN IN THE WORLD: president rouhani's foreign policy*: PALGRAVE MACMILLAN.

¹⁸⁰ Khalaj, M., 2014. President Rouhani and the IRGC., pp.1–2. Available at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/president-rouhani-and-the-irgc> [Accessed March 17, 2019].

¹⁸¹ Deutsche Welle, D.W., 2018. پاسخ تند سپاه به سخنانی حسن روحانی درباره ارتش | DW | 19.04.2018. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/fa-ir/پاسخ-تند-سپاه-به-سخنانی-حسن-روحانی-درباره-ارتش/a-43453612> [Accessed March 17, 2019].

¹⁸² Zarif, M.J., 2014. What Iran Really Wants. *Iranian Foreign Policy in the Rouhani Era*, p.8.

In addition, another factor that also contributed to the restriction of President Hassan Rouhani's role over Iran Syria policy was the Geneva II Talks, it is believed that the balance of power further tilted towards Hardliners when Iran's participation was canceled at the Geneva II conference in 2014. Rouhani had invested a lot in the Geneva II Talks, and they were crucial to give clout to his Syrian policy, but the UN Secretary-General canceled Iran's invitation in the last minute causing severe embarrassment for the reformist president. This also offered the IRGC and the president's hardliner critics an opportunity to challenge President Rouhani's policy toward Syria. Several notable sources claimed that Iran being canceled from the Geneva II talks was the work of US pressure.¹⁸³

It is suggested that the United States refused to support Iranian participation in the peace talks unless they accepted the conditions set in 2012, which state that the collective aim of the talks was to see a transitional government in Syria, founded on the basis of consent from all opposing parties including the Assad government and its political opponents. Meanwhile, some Iranian officials were also stating US responsibility for the cancelation of Iranian involvement. In an interview with the Washington post, Allaedin Boroujerdi the head of the National Security and Foreign Policy Commission of Iran's parliament said "The U.S. put pressure on [U.N. Secretary General] Ban Ki-moon, and he was forced to cancel this invitation, which shows this international body is still under the influence of big powers, headed by the U.S."¹⁸⁴ Likewise, Iranian foreign minister Javad Zarif also made similar remarks saying that depriving Iran of the Geneva peace talks is the work of the Syrian opposition and the US who put pressure on the general secretary of UN to cancel Iran participation in the meeting about the Syrian crisis.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ Akbarzadeh, S. & Conduit, D., 2016. *IRAN IN THE WORLD: president Rouhani's foreign policy*: PALGRAVE MACMILLAN.

¹⁸⁴ Rezaian, J. (2014). [Online] Iran blames U.S. for blocking it from Syria peace talks in Geneva. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/iran-blames-us-for-blocking-it-from-syria-peace-talks-in-geneva/2014/01/21/53814508-8276-11e3-a273-6ffd9cf9f4ba_story.html [Accessed 18 Mar. 2019].

¹⁸⁵ Zarif statement about the UN for canceling Iran's Participation in Geneva peace talks about Syria «ظریف دبیر کل سازمان ملل را به عدم شهادت متهم کرد». 2014. Available at: <https://radiokoocheh.com/article/234304> [Accessed March 18, 2019].

As a result, Shahram Akbarzade(2016) states that Rouhani needed to save his face after the humiliation caused by the Geneva II conference. Therefore, a distinct change of tone did not go unnoticed in his statements as he endeavored to discredit the Geneva peace talks to respond to the rejection. He stated terrorism as the main problem in Syria, and he fell in line with Iranian hardliners and the Russian and official Syrian Regime view. And in the meantime, the post-Geneva II problems at home for Rouhani were clearly mounting up with critics from the hardliners and the pro-IRGC-media suggesting that Rouhani has made Iran more exposed and vulnerable to threats from the United States.¹⁸⁶

Therefore, Geneva II is believed to be one of the most significant in the development of Iran's policy on Syria because it caused an almost immediate reversal to the unconditional support for the Syrian regime. After the Geneva incident in January 2014, the IRGC could begin to regain influence, exploiting the international fallout to bolster their agenda and position over Iran policy on Syria. Accordingly, Iran's military support in Syria also increased with hundreds of military officials from the Quds force assisting the Syrian regime's gathering of intelligence and also providing military training for Syrian soldiers. All the rhetoric from Iran about its need to support the Assad government was in terms of fighting terrorism. Then when the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) arrived on the scene and made considerable progress in 2014, it just gave more momentum and justification to the hardliners camp strategy of protecting Assad from the fanatic and extremist terrorists.

Moreover, the meteoric rise of the ISIS brought about sea changes and shaped the geopolitical landscape in the Middle East. The IS reshaped regional dynamics, which had an enormous impact on the power struggle between the hardliners and reformists led by the president Hassan Rouhani. Along with the rise

¹⁸⁶ Akbarzadeh, S. & Conduit, D., 2016. *IRAN IN THE WORLD: president Rouhani's foreign policy*: PALGRAVE MACMILLAN. P-137 , For more information check: Abdo, G., 2014. OPINION: The end of Rouhani's honeymoon. *Al Jazeera America*. Available at: <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/2/hassan-rouhani-iran-ikhameineinuclearnegotiations.html> [Accessed March 19, 2019].

of ISIS came a new chapter in the Syrian crisis and Iran's approach to it. ISIS had a big impact on both the balance powers on the ground and caused remarkable shifts in regional and Western perspectives. The terrorist attacks in the European cities made ISIS regional threat and enemy its fight in the Syrian conflict reached beyond the Middle East, forcing the West to also take notice of the ISIS threats. When ISIS took over the important Iraqi city of Mosul, reformists, as well as hardliners, saw the situation as a very serious danger to Iran. The fall of Mosul meant the threat of anti-Shia ISIS was brewing and getting closer to home.

The rise of ISIS indubitably, and particularly in Iraq, was something that Tehran could not predict and as soon as the group gained ground in Iraq, Iran had to respond with a new policy. Firstly, the Iranian approach was to try to shrink the threat, but as ISIS gained more success, the approach of Iran changed to become involved 'from behind.' Then, as the terror group's militants drew ever nearer to its territory, Iran decided to increase its involvement in Iraq in an attempt to halt further potential spilling over of the group's violent activities into other parts Iraq and Syria.¹⁸⁷

Meanwhile, the rise ISIS played an important role in unifying the two camps against the threats of the militant group. As suggested by some hardliners factions that the rise of ISIS was a "God Gift" that put both the reformists and hardliners on the same track, both camps viewed ISIS as a growing threat to Iran.¹⁸⁸ The reformists had believed Iran to be protected from foreign ideology due to the strength of its own distinctive identity and culture but changed their tune after seeing the speed at which ISIS brutally imposed itself on Mosul and other regions of Iraq and Syria.

Therefore, the swift advance of ISIS and the fear from Tehran of a spillover into Iranian lands, caused the Iranian government to step up its engagement. Iran, as mentioned, adopted the approach of keeping minimum boots on the ground and

¹⁸⁷ Esfandiary, D. & Tabatabai, A., 2015. Iran's ISIS policy., pp.1–2.

¹⁸⁸ 'Trump and ISIS were gifts from God' to Revolutionary Guard, senior Iranian official says (2018.). Available at: <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/trump-isis-gifts-from-god-to-revolutionary-guard-iranian-says-1.5464439> [Accessed March 23, 2019].

making their activities as indiscernible in some or other ways possible. Iran provided logistical and military support and advice to any group that it deemed as a counterforce to ISIS, while not hesitating to get directly involved when needed, as long as that did not jeopardize their general strategy. Iran's taking on the "leading from behind" strategy, seemed to benefit the regime in Tehran in its strategy for saving its ally in Syria. Iran taking ISIS threat as pretext increased its support politically, militarily and financially to the Syrian regime and it also would deploy its elite force for direct engagement, whenever necessary. While stretching Iranian resources, this commitment did, however, produce the desired result of Assad's going virtually unchallenged and ironically, seems to have been by the ISIS phenomenon.¹⁸⁹

So, it can be understood that with the arrival of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, Iranian foreign policies both at home and abroad, were massively affected. Within the domestic arena, this phenomenon further sidelined Rouhani's agenda in regard to his policy on Syria. With the claim in June 2014 of establishing a caliphate stretching from Iraq through to Syria, the IRGC and hardliners drew even more strength in justifying their tough militant approach in Syria. Moreover, in abroad the outlandish declaration of a caliphate in Iraq and Syria by ISIS, made IRGC more dominant and meanwhile it also enabled the Quds Force officers to mobilize thousands of foreign Shia fighters, including Afghans, Iraqis, and Pakistanis in order to strengthen the army manpower of the Syrian regime's forces. IRGC-Quds force commander, General Suleimani became a prominent figure for the hardliners as he led the frontlines against the threat of ISIS and other extremist Sunni groups in Syria and Iraq. On several occasions, General Suleimani could be seen photographed in the battlefield. All this gave a clear message to President Rouhani showing the strength and dominance of the IRGC and its activities in the region are not to be questioned or challenged which inevitably resulted in further ostracizing

¹⁸⁹ Esfandiary, D. & Tabatabai, A., 2015. Iran's ISIS policy., pp.1-2.

Rouhani and his capacity to implement his policy toward Syria both at home and abroad.¹⁹⁰

As a result of these three factors, Rouhani became severely restricted, and whole situation forced him to adopt the foreign policy agenda of the hardline IRGC, leaving Iran totally fixed on supporting the Syrian regime as a holy duty to combat the Sunni terrorists and counter Israel's efforts to stifle the "axis of resistance." Foreign Minister Zarif made statements to this effect in 2014, after talks with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem in Tehran, Zarif declared that Iran would remain to be in complete solidarity with the Syrian government. Zarif said the Syrian government and the Syrian people can count on his support because these "Takfiri" groups were their common enemies. Demonstrating this view Rouhani stated after a meeting with the Syrian Prime Minister "the Syrian government and nation have been able to resist well against plots and the war and the international public opinion is aware of this fact that the Syrian nation and army are fighting against terrorist groups and foreign plots."¹⁹¹

Going one step further in June 2nd, 2015 Rouhani went on to promise that "The Iranian nation and government will remain at the side of the Syrian nation and government until the end of the road...Tehran has not forgotten its moral obligations to Syria and will continue to provide help and support on its own terms to the government and nation of Syria." Iran's politicians became unable to prevent the complete dominance of the IRGC by the middle of 2014 in relation to the foreign policy, and the rhetoric of the hardliners was once again holding sway.¹⁹²

Moreover, on the sidelines of the security conference in Munich on February 2014, Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif admitted then to the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, that he did not have control over Iran's policy discourse on Syria. This admission leaves no doubt that instead of a conventional

¹⁹⁰ Ibid

¹⁹¹ Akbarzadeh, S. & Conduit, D., 2016. *IRAN IN THE WORLD: President Rouhani's foreign policy*: PALGRAVE MACMILLAN.

¹⁹² Goodarzi, J.M. and Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2015. *Iran and Syria: The End of the Road?* Wilson Center.

government foreign affairs ministry leading policy on Syria, it is the Shi'a religious fervor of the Supreme Leader and hardliners taking the reins.¹⁹³

Although Rouhani was having a smoother time in his initial six months in the job and in that time, he tried to engage with the international community on the matter of a peaceful solution in Syria. Meanwhile, the conservative hardliners of the IRGC were looking for a way to regain their position of influence on the policy toward Syria. The rapid rise of ISIS and the setback in Geneva proved to be the catalysts for the IRGC and Hardliners to retain their dominance over Syrian policy by increasing military support and this provided a pretext to increase its military engagement.

All this shows that there are real limits in the power of a President in Iran. Rouhani clearly had a vision for Iran's Syria policy, which may have been a workable one, but he has been rendered ineffective by conservative religious elements within the power structure of the country. The main factor in shaping the internal and regional politics of Iran has been due to the Hardliners and IRGC grip on power, which they have revived as a result of their engagement in Syria. Therefore, it was clear that the country's domestic politics and policy on Syria were being steered neither by Rouhani and nor by his foreign minister Javad Zarif; instead, it has been steered by the hardliners camp.

4.4. Concluding Remarks

There is no doubt, the Syrian crisis has served as a case of test of power balance between the hardliners and reformists factions in Iran. Therefore, it is believed that the Syrian crisis is one of the most decisive in the Iranian history since the advent of the Islamic Revolution. The crisis in Syria put both camps at the debate over various discernible areas on which they criticize each other's. The

¹⁹³ Abdo, G., 2014. OPINION: The end of Rouhani's honeymoon. *Al Jazeera America*. Available at: <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/2/hassan-rouhani-iranalikhameneinuclearnegotiations.html> [Accessed March 19, 2019]. Also check Akbarzadeh, S. & Conduit, D., 2016. *IRAN IN THE WORLD: President Rouhani's foreign policy*: PALGRAVE MACMILLAN page 137.

hardliners say the Islamic Republic of Iran has an important strategic objective in Syria and must have a strong presence in the country to play a leading role, whereas the reformers see Iranian involvement in Syria as unnecessary and voice serious reservations about being allied with the Assad Regime. Assad's massacring of protestors at the start of the Syrian civil war was something actually supported and encouraged by the hardliners of Iran.

However, the reformists have seen events go against them by giving the religious hardliners, especially from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) a center stage. Although Rouhani was having a smoother time in his initial six months in the job and in that time, he tried to engage with the international community on the matter of a peaceful solution in Syria. However, unstable conditions in the region such as the rapid rise of ISIS and the setback in Geneva proved to be the catalysts for the IRGC and Hardliners to retain their dominance militant approach over Iran's Syria policy.

All this shows that the Syrian crisis became a watershed movement, and it had a great impact on the internal power configuration of Iran. It completely changed the tide of power against the reformist's camp although they had two consecutive electoral victories.

Conclusions

It can be said with confidence that Iran is not a rogue state and discussion as to what drives its foreign policy remains open. This thesis is an attempt to make plain the way Iranian foreign policy in Syria has been made with a pragmatic and defensive mindset. The first chapter shows how the mutually beneficial and strategic cooperation between Iran and Syria has from the very start been based on a clearly pragmatic purpose; seeking to consolidate and protect the power of both governments. What will be clarified, however, is that this alliance is not just a simple marriage of convenience. This thesis unveiled how the mutual aims and perspectives of both nations have not only strengthened their relationship and seen it survive up until today but have also meant that the horrific Syrian conflict war has become a scenario that has forced their alliance to become closer than ever before. To fully grasp how high the stakes are for Iran in Syria and the reason it has unwaveringly stood by the Assad government since all the chaos erupted in 2011, the thesis had more in more depth look at the historical roots of their alliance. With fundamentally shared beliefs on the most pressing issues of the region, the cementing of their alliance over the decades has not really come as a massive surprise.

Historical studies in the thesis demonstrate a notable similarity between Iranian and Syrian foreign policy agenda and world view over the past thirty years. Both Iran and Syria can be observed to have the same skepticism of outside forces plotting against them and attempting to influence their affairs. A shared pragmatic understanding of their alliance was founded from 1979 to the present day. Security is the word that best summarizes the need for their alliance. Nevertheless, the demands of building a modern-day economy on the shaky ground of constant political changes in the region have caused Iran and Syria to adapt their policies accordingly. In times of conflicting interests, they have managed a harmonious collaboration strengthened by sharing of common enemies, allies, political and economic interests and also with much the same type of religious affiliations.

After the war in Syria in 2011 broke out, the relationship took on a new importance. With the initial wave of protests beginning in Tunisia, in the winter of 2010-2011 and then rippling out into neighboring countries. The reaction from Tehran was supportive because Iran thought that the Arab nations freeing themselves of Western dominance. Iran celebrated the Arab spring and declared it as a genuine Islamic uprising in the Middle East and North Africa that would spell the end of Western-sponsored tyrants and path the way for popular Islamist governments. In other words, from Iran's perspective, these uprisings meant that the tables had finally turned on their enemies.

However, when it came to the uprising in Syria, the government in Tehran found itself in a dilemma because if it chose to support Syria, it would be seen as hypocritical and risk losing all respect of the Muslim world. But if it just stood by and watched Assad's demise, there would be a real likelihood that whatever regime would emerge after Assad would not share Iran's agenda and therefore Iran would lose an ally that it needs in order to protect its position in the region. When considering all these elements we find that Iran has two main perspectives on the recent Middle Eastern developments: in North Africa (Egypt, Libya, Tunisia), and the Gulf (Bahrain, and Yemen). Iran named these uprisings Islamic awakenings and connected them to their own, so called Islamic revolution. Iran saw all the unrest and protests in the North Africa and in the Gulf as the unfolding of an Islamic awakening that for a long time, had been needed. In the Levant, it can be said that Tehran has shown double standards and as mentioned before in relation to Bahrain, Iran accused the US of having double standards in its response to the uprising that broke out in Bahrain and Yemen.

The Syrian crisis was a threat to the decades' long Syrian-Iranian alliance because the Assad government's future was hanging in the balance and the end of Assad would be the end of Iran's closest and most important regional ally. Actually, the fall of Assad would be the most serious challenge to Iran since 1988, when it had to exit the conflict with Iraq and in fact, the end of Assad it could become the challenge for the Islamic Republic of Iran since its inception. It would also cause

an obstacle for the ideologically driven foreign policy agenda that Iran is currently pursuing. The current Syrian rulers are the only reliable ally of Tehran from among the Arab counties, and the collaboration enables the flow of Iranian arms and material aid to Hezbollah in Lebanon. The ousting of the Assad regime in Damascus would change the balance of power in the region in a considerable way. Iran would be unable to provide support to Hezbollah which would then make Iran incapable of sufficient influence in Lebanon and in the Arab-Israeli conflict. The worst nightmare of Iran is their ally being replaced by an anti-Shia regime allied with Saudi Arabia.

Therefore, in a bid to prevent this from happening the Iranian regime in the initial phase of the Syrian civil coinciding with the later part of the president Ahmadinejad era, sought to develop a position on the Syria which would best suite their ideological agenda. As the distressing scenes of unrest in Syria emerged, Iran put its eggs in the basket of the Alawite regime but at times has shown somewhat contradictory approaches on its involvement in Syria. At first, Iran made no response to the violent crackdown of the protesters by the Syrian authorities. As the situation went from bad to worse, it went outside the control of Bashar Assad, Tehran then begun to spout rhetoric about foreign intervention and accusing Israel and the US of deliberately provoking protests to cause unrest in Syria in order to further their own hegemonic agenda in the region. Then the civil war quickly become submerged in the struggle against extreme militant Sunni groups and the emergence on the scene of ISIS led to the religious, sectarian ideological element dominating the discourse in Tehran. Sacred tasks, like the active protection of the Zeynep Shrine and the Shia eschatology, became woven into Iran's narrative on the Syrian crisis. Iran may have tried to not be dominated by a sectarian agenda, but the unapologetically religious position on the active defense of Shi'a holy sites in Syria and also with the recruiting of Shi'a ground troops, Iran's foreign policy clearly became driven more and more by religious ideology or at least this is the perception that has increased and become hard to shake off.

Initially, Iran did its uppermost to save the Syrian regime, and Iranian support for the Assad regime has been the key to its survival through all the massive challenges of the Syrian War. Without such a geopolitically vital ally, The Iranian Republic would be severely exposed. So, in order to support its ally, Iran has taken on very thorough, expensive, and integrated efforts on many levels. The support that Syria received from Iran in 2012 started to increase significantly, and in early 2013 when Assad lost much of his land to opposition militants, Iran provided Assad financial (credit lines, oil and gas supplies and military funding), direct and indirect military assistance.

At the start of the Syrian uprisings, the reformist's camp was initially critical about Ahmadinejad and Ayatollah Khamenei's support for the Syrian regime. The regime in Iran believes it has the right to step in and rescue Assad and has deployed most of its elite military forces including IRGC-QF and IRGC-GF under the direct command of the charismatic commander of its Quds forces General Qasim Suleimani. Even at a devastating cost with huge losses and economic woes, Iran's engagement in Syria has been successful, and Assad is on top against the rebels and regaining his previously lost territories. For its efforts in support of the Assad regime, Iran and the IRGC will impose their agenda in the region, behind all their economic and military activities, they see their role as expanding the Iranian revolutionary into Syria and increasing the realm of Shia supremacy spearheaded by the Ayatollah. However, the course of events in Syria took a considerable twist when the reformists in Iran won the election in May 2013. With this phase of the crisis also came the rise of ISIS, which spread its presence in Syria. ISIS changed the dynamics of the situation, forcing the US and Europe to recalibrate their priorities. Where in the first phase, US policies aimed at regime change, in the second phase, the US focused on the fight against ISIS instead. All parties involved in the Syrian conflict at this stage took a change in their strategy, such was the impact for ISIS.

Rouhani's coming to the office only modified Iranian foreign policy's approach on Syria but without any big changes. Tehran continued siding with

Damascus, warning the international community against any type of military intervention seeking its influence over the country. The arrival of the reformist Rouhani did somewhat soften the atmosphere, increasing the hope of a positive effort for peace, but however, not much hope was to be found in changing the Iranian policy toward Syria War. Therefore, it can be stated that the war in Syria has served as an event to test the power balance between the hardliners and reformists factions in Iran. Hence, it is believed that the Syrian crisis is the one of the most revealing in modern Iranian history. The crisis heightened debate of both camps with the hardliners saying that the Islamic Republic of Iran has a strategic duty in Syria and must play a leading role in the country, while the reformers see Iranian involvement in Syria as unwise and have major concerns about being allied with the oppressive Assad Regime. The hardliners take the opposite view as Assad's massacring of the protestors is said to have been something that was supported and encouraged by the hardliners of Iran.

However, for the reformists, the flow of events goes against them and instead favoring the religious hardliners, especially from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Rouhani did see a fairly smooth time in his first six months, during which time he made attempts to engage with the international community for cooperation in seeking a peaceful solution in Syria. However, worsening conditions in the region with the rise of ISIS and rejection from the Geneva peace talks proved to be the catalysts for the IRGC and Hardliners to pounce on Iran's Syria policy, driving it in a more hardline militant direction.

Therefore, it can be observed that there are quite substantial limits to the power of a President in Iran. Rouhani clearly had a vision for Iran's approach toward the Syrian crisis which may have valuable, but he was rendered virtually obsolete by the conservative religious factions within the country. The core element in the shaping of both domestic politics in Iran has been the grip that the Hardliners and the IRGC have on power, which has been revived through their engagement in Syria. Therefore, it was clear that the policy on Syria was not being dictated by the president or his foreign minister Javad Zarif.

To conclude, the recent events in the region and the empowerment of the Hardliners and the IRGC, all show that the Syrian crisis became a watershed moment for Iran's alliance with Syria, and it had a great impact on the internal power configuration in Iran, playing right into the hands of the hardliners and leaving the reformists stranded.

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